

# Gustawa Birencwajg

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Warsaw

Poland

Interviewer: Marta Cobel-Tokarska

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Mrs. Gustawa Birencwajg is an extraordinary person; despite her advanced age, she has retained a clear mind, energy and a sense of humor. Mrs. Birencwajg is a rather short, fragile old lady, she has blue eyes - unfortunately, she is almost completely blind - and a warm smile. She worked hard all her life and thanks to her perseverance and wit the entire Birencwajg family survived the war. Signs of this strength, dignity and self-confidence are still evident in Mrs. Birencwajg's behavior. She lives in a small apartment in a high-rise in Warsaw with her daughter Halina Leszczyńska, also an interviewee of Centropa.



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## Family background

I won't say anything about any grandparents. Grandparents are out. I had no grandparents at all. Nothing, nothing, nothing, absolutely. I only had two cousins who came from a small town; I think it was Tarnow [a city approx. 300 km south of Warsaw] to Lodz as servants.

My Father was Abram Blum, Awrom in Jewish, and my mother was Chaja, maiden name Ajchenbaum. My father was not religious, but my mother wore a wig and she was 'negramotnaya' [Russian: illiterate], that is she couldn't read or write. But when it comes to [Jewish] tradition, it was strictly followed at home thanks to Mother. She was a very shapely, pretty woman, red hair, green eyes; but Father was a very sick man. Perhaps if he hadn't been so sick he wouldn't have taken my mother as wife. Because he was more cultured. In those years [before WWI] he belonged to the merchants' association, that is, he was more cultured.

Father had a brush factory, brushes for scrubbing the floor. These brushes had to be made from scratch: from a piece of wood until the end, with the holes, everything. There were machines, but almost everything was done by hand. My father operated such a machine himself and there were three other boys who stuck rice in those holes. Actually, it was rice straw, such short bunches. They had these norms about how much they should put in. Into those holes. And then they would wire it. You won't find this anymore today. These rice brushes have disappeared. These brushes then had

to be stacked by hand. There were these large floor brushes and these smaller hand brushes, counted by the dozen.

My mother would take those brushes to a man who ran a store. No one would take it by car... There were no cars. It was in Lodz, on Nowomiejska Street, his name was Segal, he had this large dry goods store and that's where we carried those brushes all week long and on Friday Father would go there, count everything and get paid. Right next to this store there was this Jewish confectionery and my father would always stop by and buy a piece of biscuit. This biscuit was really high, I don't think they make it anymore, I don't know how much it could have weighed. A pound. A pound and a half? They'd pack it and he'd buy it on Friday for Saturday. Not like it is today, where you bake so much and buy so much... No. Very modest, but very nice.

## Growing up

I was born in 1908. My siblings? There was a little sister, she was younger by some 18 months or two years and a little brother in his cradle [when I was small]. I remember as if today, when I was rocking that cradle I rocked it so it fell over with the baby. And that's it for children, children didn't play a role in my life. One was called Laja, today it would be Lola and the boy was Frojm. That was after my father. There's a custom among Jews that children are named after the dead, not after the living [relatives].

Now I have to say what tenants there were in the house where I lived: on Drewnowska Street 26/28, in Lodz [Drewnowska Street separates the Baluty district from downtown Lodz]. The housekeeper there was a Pole. But there were mostly Jews living there. There was a courtyard and an outbuilding, there was a bakery downstairs and both Jews and Poles lived there. But not many Poles.

You'd never use names when referring to neighbors, but only professions. So there was a woman who made quilts, so she'd be called, in Yiddish, 'koldermache,' there was a baker who baked donuts, so he'd be called 'paczkimache' ['paczek' means donut in Polish], there was also a man who baked bagels - there were no more of these after the war - so he'd be called 'bajgielmache.'

Rich Jews lived in a different district and poor Jews lived in Baluty [district] in Lodz. It was a poor district, poor Jews, Poles and Germans, but mostly Jews. And they were really poor. Destitute. Children, the norm was six per family, and they'd all live in one room. The mother wouldn't work. There were children, seven, eight years old, who'd trade to help the family out. What kind of trade? A kid would wear a hat from an older brother, shoes from a sister, but it was the most important for that kid to have a scarf.

Before the war [probably WWII] there were these balloons with soda water, 10 or 15 liters, so they'd carry this balloon with ice in a bucket, this bucket, two glasses for water, so if someone had a drink they could wash it [the glass]. I don't remember how much this glass of water cost. They'd call: 'Soda water, zudewaser, zudewaser!' That's how they helped their families.

That's perhaps why there was such hatred between Jews and Poles, because a Jew would always come up with something to do for a living. Before the war there were those [Jews] who'd carry a bag on their backs and call: 'Trade, trade, I'm buying old rags, buying old clothes!' They'd come into the courtyards yelling that. If someone had something, they'd take it out, get a few grosze

[1/100th of 1 zloty, currency unit, a few grosze was a very small amount of money], these old clothes would keep going around, someone bought it, someone later sold it in some small stall. That's what life was like.

Before the war there was a slaughterhouse where Jews went to slaughter a chicken or a duck. And there were women who'd pluck the poultry. The idea was not to pull the skin off, but to pluck the feathers. What other professions were there? For example there'd be this one with a cart who went round shouting 'smot, smot!', he'd give you a ring or some bowl for old rags. There were professions which, I can't imagine how you could support a family [on such wages] on. Or a glassworker. He carried the entire workshop on his back and went around shouting: 'I put in windows!

For example, when girls went to learn a trade, for some three years they'd run errands. They'd mind a baby or go help at a store, but the longer a girl was serving as an apprentice, the less duties she had. Or a dressmaker. When she had a dress to sew, this girl [who was helping, as an apprentice] would get some money, very little, but still it was good for her. Girls would usually be sent off to dressmakers, seamstresses, corset makers. And to a 'modiste' [French: milliner], that was a smart profession.

There was this Pole who lived at our house - he was a tram driver, that was quite a job then. There was also a Mrs. Marcinkowska, her husband worked at a bank. He wasn't friendly with anyone, he didn't talk to anyone at all, but Mrs. Marcinkowska could speak Jewish [Yiddish] like a Jewess. And none of them [Poles and Jews] argued; they all lived together peacefully.

Opposite our apartment, right next door, there was also a Polish family. They usually didn't have work in the wintertime, because they were bricklayers. We went there, went out together, played together, invited each other, when it was Christmas, they'd give us some yeast cake. Usually, Jews were not allowed to eat anything at a Pole's house, nothing. But I... well, they didn't forbid me at home, so I would go there for Christmas and have that cake. But the other way round, when it was Pesach, they'd always get some nuts and a piece of matzah at our place.

When I was a little girl I didn't have toys like children do today, just a rolled up towel... Towels didn't use to be as elegant as they are today. You'd tie it with string and there were eyes, a nose and you had a doll. Most often we'd play store [that is, pretend to run a store]. Polish and Jewish children together, there was no difference. There was grass in the courtyard. So we'd often pull some grass out and play store with it. We made the scale out of shoe polish boxes. These metal boxes. When you'd open one of these boxes, there'd be two parts, one of the older kids would make a scale, with pieces of string and a piece of wood. When it went down, you'd know where there was more. And this was the entire set of toys for children.

There was this custom among Jews that on a Friday you had to wash all the children's heads, put kerosene on the girls' heads and make bows. There was this one braid joined together with another braid [from the temple to the back of the head], here [next to the head] there'd be a red bow. Why kerosene? Because there were no other ways to chase away lice. Quite simply. No, there were no cosmetics. There was gray soap, a piece of 'Schicht' soap with a deer [on the bar of soap], that was the best kind ['Jelen' ('Deer') soap from the Schicht factory].

Children would dress up for dinner. Two challot covered with a special napkin were put on the table on Friday evening. There was something written in Hebrew there, I don't know what. Father would leave, I don't know where, perhaps he'd go out to pray or just leave. Everything was put smartly on the table, the candles were lit, Mother would pray. I don't know what she said. I think she asked God for her children's health, her husband's health, she asked God for everything.

My father would come back from those prayers in the evening, do some prayer over this challah, uncover it and cut it into pieces for us, children. This was called 'a mojca' [from Yiddish: mojca, a piece of challah]. And afterwards we'd sit down at the table and eat stuffed fish. This doesn't mean that all Jews did that. They usually didn't. Instead of fish, people sometimes had a piece of herring. Those were very poor people, they were living in very harsh conditions, they didn't even know Polish yet; they spoke Polish with a Jewish accent, often confusing some words. When we had that supper, there was always fish and a cup of wine.

After Father said some prayer, each child had a drink from that cup, it was a large cup. And there was broth, with noodles, 'lazanki' [noodles with cabbage], peas, beans, meat and compote. And that was all. And when you had to turn off the light, the caretaker would come [as Sabbath goy]. Because Jews were not allowed to turn off the light [as no work was to be performed on Sabbath]. The caretaker used to come, turn off the lights and get a piece of challah for that. It was considered a very good thing. Because before the war, the caretaker couldn't afford challah. And neither could some Jews.

On Saturdays my father used to take the tallit - it's a kind of prayer shawl and it had this nice velvet bag [a bag for carrying the tallit], the richer you were, the nicer it was. He'd put it on and go pray. Although...did he really pray? As far as I know, he'd rather go to his buddies, play cards or dominos or chess...

For my mother it was important that he left the house. We [the children] were home and mother would make lunch. On Friday you'd take a pot with potatoes to the baker's, it was called chulent. When a Jew was rich, he'd put a large piece of meat in this chulent. And usually at 12 o'clock on Saturdays, the youngest child went to get that chulent, took a rag with him. This chulent was paid for, I don't remember how many groszy, but there was a number stuck to it and I would get this same number on Friday [when the pot was left there]. And on Saturdays you'd pick your pot up, according to that number. But there were sometimes these smart guys, who'd take a rich person's chulent if it was better. And later there'd be no chulent for him, the rich person. So you'd have to contrive something.

In this pot with the chulent, there was also a small pot, like a small flower pot. It was made of clay and there was kugel inside it. This kugel was made from noodles, cooked, some apples would be added, some raisins. And everyone would eat a bit of it on Saturdays, when they were eating this chulent and broth. The kids would get nuts; they were dressed in their best clothes, clean. We'd run out to play in the yard and we'd sometimes make a hole [in the ground] with the heel of the shoe and play with nuts. It was about putting the nut into the hole.

On Saturdays Father would always go to the Jewish theater with me. It was on Konstanytnowska Street, now it is 11 Listopada Street. But this theater burned down, my father died, and I didn't go [to the theater] any more. Later, we'd go there with my husband for some plays, which are not staged anymore, they don't exist any longer. My mother never went to the theater and never went

out anywhere. Perhaps only to visit friends.

When someone's child was born, it would be circumcised, there was a ceremony. And when this piece of the penis was cut off, there was this little bowl with sand, it was put in there. It was a great ceremony, [especially] if it was the first [son] in the family. Everyone would pray and the child would be christened - I don't mean christened, I mean he'd be given a name.

There were other holidays, there was Easter [Pesach]. Six weeks before the holiday, you'd buy a goose and make 'szmalec' [lard] for Pesach. But to make this 'szmalec,' you first had to kosher the kitchen. You had to burn the fire in the oven so that everything was red, burned through. And you'd put this 'szmalec' in a special pot, tie it up [the pot with a rag], put it on the cupboard. All those dishes which were not used during the year, just for Easter; otherwise they were stored in the cupboard. From one holiday until the next one. Covered with paper.

There was also this custom, I don't know if it still exists today, that if a pot was damaged you couldn't use it on Easter. There'd be these [people] walking around and shouting: 'soldering, wiring!' - Two men with this huge, metal kettle. If someone didn't have special dishes for the holidays, but used those which were used every day, he'd put them in the water and it was supposed to make it kosher. It was hardest for poor people, because they couldn't afford dishes for Easter and for regular days. So he'd scrub this pot, clean it, go and soak it in the water and then this was kosher.

Because with Jews, you couldn't, God forbid, have meat in the pot in which you boil milk. It was forbidden. It had to be clean, meat was put in the water... Beef, not pork, because I didn't know for years what a pig looked like. You'd always buy meat at your butcher's, you'd say [you need meat] 'for broth' and you wouldn't take as much as you would today. A pound. He'd give you a bit of this, a bit of that and you had meat for broth.

Father was always the person who was best served at home. It was as if he was sitting on a throne. Everyone did their best for Daddy, to serve the food as nicely as possible. And the children were served little pieces and that was good. You couldn't eat bread on Easter at our house. For eight days. Matzah was made by hand. At a baker's, he'd bake this matzah especially [for that occasion]. And he'd pay women to knead that matzah. And matzah is flour and water. The wheat has to be of the purest kind. Then it is ground kosher, it all has to be clean. When a woman was having her period, she wasn't allowed to do this. Because she'd be 'treyf'. Unkosher. But these women really worked hard at it. Because it was tough to earn some money making that matzah. Because you had to knead it, so there would be no lumps, because otherwise it would be unkosher.

The next holiday is in the fall. That was 'Roszaszuna' [Rosh Hashanah] and then Judgment Day [Yom Kippur]. Women and men pray. The richer ones go to a prayer house. The poorer ones, they'd rent rooms from those even poorer and say their prayers in the other room, the women would repeat them. Judgment Day, you can't eat anything. When the sun sets tonight, you can't eat anything, only the next day, when the sun sets again. But nothing to eat. Or drink. Absolutely.

Then there's 'Kuczki,' or so-called Sykes [Sukkot]. Then men make these 'palaty' [Russian: tents], these roofs covered with pine branches. The richer ones, those who had balconies, would do it on the balcony. And if you didn't have a balcony, the neighbors gathered and decorated the yard. Boys ate there [in the booth], but girls were not allowed to. The women stood at the gate, so they

could hear the prayers. And they took food to these 'sykes,' these 'palaty.' And what special food was served on Sykes? Mostly there was broth, that was a great tsimes [broth was a holiday dish] and fish. That was all taken to this 'sykes' to the husband. You wouldn't sleep there. It was only for praying, for eating.

That's how it was before World War I. I remember that after the first world war, my father and siblings were dead. I was orphaned by my father before I turned five years old, I think. He had tuberculosis. We had a doctor stay with us and he was called on all the time, because father had these hemorrhages. And it didn't take long for him to die; he was 29 years old. And my siblings died as well. [Editor's note: that's why Mrs. Birencwajg said earlier that siblings didn't play a significant part in her life.] And I was left alone with my mother. My mother lived from what she sold: these tools we had in the factory [rice bristle brush factory], she sold a bit of everything we had, because there was no more salary, no pension, absolutely nothing. After that my childhood was very sad.

I remember 1914, when there were two cousins from a small town living with us. The Cossacks [1](#) were looking for girls then. 'Dievochki y dievochki' [Russian: 'girls and girls']. We were living on the ground floor then, my mother would leave the window open a crack, so if a soldier would come in through the door, the girls could get out through the window. And if it was the other way round, then through the door. A Cossack came once, I remember it until today, he put his leg in through the window. He said to my mom to give him a girl. And Mother says, 'I don't have a girl.' I was standing next to my mother, he took out his sabre, but my mother was a very brave woman, and she said, 'Here, kill me, I don't have girls.' I started crying horribly, 'Mom, mom!' He somehow contained himself and only yelled at me, 'Don't cry!' In Russian. And he went away.

During the war [WWI] my mother was smuggling and it was best to go with a child [as a child created an alibi for the smuggling woman]. I was maybe eight years old by then. She went from Lodz to Ozorkow [approx. 20 km north of Lodz] or to Leczyca [approx. 35 km north of Lodz]. Very far. I was really afraid of the telephone posts, because they made a strange humming noise and you couldn't shout. I was so frightened I bit my fingernails. You'd walk on foot. At night. Very dark night. Usually those were white pieces of cloth, 17 meters, you'd use 'arshins' then [arshin - an old unit of measure, a Russian arshin was approx. 0.7 meters, a Polish arshin was 0.8 meters]. They'd be wrapped [around the body] and that's how you'd go, they'd buy it there. It was a safe place. And my mother and I, we lived from that smuggling for a long time.

I went to school at 16 Szkolna Street. It was a school in a private house. Only Jewish children went there. But it was a public school. A Jewess taught religion there, a teacher. Mostly historical [aspects]. Those kings, how terrible some of them were, about Moses, how they put him in the water in that basket, such stories. Of course, that was Jewish religion. There was no cross there [in the classroom]. The boys didn't wear hats. Everything was taught in Polish. Yes, in Polish. The music teacher spoke Polish. I didn't graduate from that school because there was no way for me to graduate.

My mama died in 1918. She was in the hospital in Radogoszcz. That's just outside of Lodz. I think it still exists [currently Radogoszcz is a district of Lodz]. I went to visit my mama. They didn't let me inside [the room]; I could only look in through the window. And I was standing there, but my mother must have lost consciousness. I remember that the nurse went up to her and said,

'Chajusia, your daughter has come!' and my mama calmed down a bit, but she died later.

I had no family, just two cousins, who were already married. When my parents had a bit more money, they bought, well, it wasn't a silver platter, but silver tableware, silver candlesticks. When they started to be a bit better off, they started buying better things. So all this remained: a furnished apartment, silver tableware, beautiful silver candlesticks... What could they do with me? Should they send me to an orphanage or to that cousin who had already gotten married?

I was ten years old and I went to that cousin. Her name was Malka Szwarc. She was from my mama's side of the family. She came from a good house, but her husband was a gambler and a womanizer. As they say today 'molester' - that's how he was. Raping was no problem for him. When I was a bit older and they had their own child, I only took care of that child. There was no baby stroller, nothing. They didn't let me go to school. She used to say: 'I'm not educated, you don't have to be either.'

I was beaten very hard by that cousin. Why? Because they lived from cleaning cow's legs, they'd scrape the hair off the legs. They would give it to his mother, she had a meat store, it was called a butcher's shop. There they'd chop these legs up and the rich bought there, because they wanted these legs for making jelly. These legs had to be carried to the butcher's shop. You'd take a tram, because it was quite a long way. Very tough. There was this basket with a handle. I cried, because I didn't want to take these legs to the shop, so he beat me. Now I know this cousin was a sadist, I didn't know it then and I was afraid of him.

When I got a bit older, I didn't want to live there any longer. I slept on the floor in a neighbor's apartment. My cousin's husband spent everything that was left after my mother's death on drinking. After that I was useless, but they kept me out of pity, because I was an orphan.

But later I left their house and went to a friend of my father's. He was also a brush maker, like my father. His name was Chaim Oszpicen. They were living in Lodz, at 10 Ogródowa Street. She [his wife] was young; he was an older man himself. He had two children, three more were born later, that was five. The married couple and kids made seven, I was eighth. They were all in one room. I had my own quilt and a folding bed and their daughter slept with me. They didn't want to take any money from me. I went to work in the cold cut shop.

There were only two such companies in Lodz: Diament and Dyszkin. I went to Diament's. We ate there all day long, whatever we wanted to. The owner was good and there was this rule that in the evening you could take 10 decagram of cold cuts and two rolls with you. You'd always put it on the scale and the person minding the scale turned her back and you could always take more. Because I wasn't paying any rent, I'd give this packet to them every day.

Diament had four branches in Lodz. And they moved me to each branch as soon as it was opened. I was quite talented, I could weigh [the cold cuts]. I remember how an old Jew came, who bought 10, 15 kilograms and he would later sell it in bars and taverns. So he always got a bit more, so he wouldn't be short, when he was selling it.

I used to work a lot, scrub floors, carry water, because there was no sewage system in Lodz then. There was no eight-hour workday either. You worked for 14 hours. Hard. You didn't have much time to play and have fun. Oh no. I earned 10 zloty a week. On Fridays, when the sun set, the store had

to be closed. I had free time the next day, until the evening. On Saturdays, after the sun set, you could open the store and trade again.

There were five of us, girls, behind the counter. We lived together very well. They called me 'zywe srebro' [Polish: literally 'liquid silver,' a person who is lively and energetic, always on the move], because I was such an active, pretty girl. They would bring in these wicker baskets with cold cuts, you had to take it from the cart driver, unload it, arrange it, so that it would look nicely. There were no machines in that shop, like there are now. Everything was done by hand, long knives were sharpened, you had to know how to do it. There were various cold cuts, you had to give some expensive ones and some cheaper ones, so it would even out the price, so the owner would earn some money. It was a large company.

There was this young man - at that time it was called - golden youth. He played the banjo, a fun boy. Anyway, he courted me there. Moryc. Zilber... Zilbersztajn? No, I don't remember. But his name began with a 'z.' At the store they thought he'd be a great match for me. And finally we got engaged. And it wasn't just an oral agreement, you had to write on this piece of paper, it was called 'ksyba.' [Editor's note: ketubbah, but an engagement agreement is called 'tnaim,' meaning 'conditions', 'tnoim' in Yiddish.] There was this special Jew who came, he was deeply religious, and he wrote there that I... actually I don't know what he wrote! That I was his fiancée, that I would spend my entire life with him, I don't know what.

I had my dowry all ready, in a basket under the bed. I didn't work on Saturdays, so I didn't have food then. So on Saturdays I had to spend some money, on sleeping, on bed linen, there wasn't much left. But I was always nicely dressed, elegant but modest. This fiancé helped me, to be honest. He gave me a ring, a fur coat and it was good.

That was in the 1920s. This fiancé also liked to play pool, when he finished work on Friday, he'd run off to play pool. Once he even forgot he had a date with me. I went home and I waited for him to pick me up. And my later husband, Dawid Birencwajg, was a friend of his. He rented a room from his sister. And that's how they met. My husband was a freethinker by then. But to say the truth, I didn't know what that was. I was used to tradition.

Anyway, this friend [Birencwajg] came to me. He said, 'Gucia [abbreviation of Gustawa], why are you sitting here waiting for him? He won't come, go to the movies with me.' I wasn't so worldly, to run around like that, so I told him, 'No, I can't, because my fiancé is supposed to come.' And he said, 'You won't marry him.' I said, 'Why?' And he replied, 'Because you'll be my wife.' I took this lightly and said, 'What stupid things you're saying.'

I admit it, I broke up with that fiancé of mine. Because Dawid would come round, take me to the movies, here, there. And that was when I started sharing his views a bit - freethinking views. He really wanted us to live together without getting married. I was working, trying, doing the best I could. He was already accused of something, with leftist issues, I didn't know. And he went to jail.

I had this stack of letters which he wrote me from jail. That he was dreaming about me at night, about my long neck, I didn't even know what, but those were really love letters. I knew that he was lonely, so I always tried to arrange for a package for him [to be delivered] to jail. There were such merry guys there in prison, that they would eat it all up and not give him anything. My boss's factory was opposite the jail. The prison was at 13 Gdanska Street and my owner had a factory at

14 Gdanska Street. He spent a lot of time in there, managed to write some love letters, and they finally let him out.

Dawid came from Sosnowiec. His father's name was Abram, his mother was Tema. There were six children in all. Four daughters and two sons. One daughter was called Rozia [Rachela], the second one Sala, the third one Laja, and the fourth one was Bluma. Both sons were almost never at home. The reason for that was: once Dawid bought himself a bottle of Sinalco [a soft drink] lemonade on a Saturday and his mother saw this and said, 'Wait until I tell your father, he'll show you.' As soon as she said that, he went off, good bye, he wasn't there anymore. He went to Piotrkow [a city 40 km from Lodz], where he worked in a kitchen, that's how he learned his trade - a waiter. It was a very religious family. Although my mother-in-law couldn't read about this religion from any book, she'd always go to the prayer house for all the holidays.

And so we got married... I went to his parents' and the religious wedding took place there. Under the canopy [chuppah], there were candles and everything was like it should be. And then we lived in Lodz. My husband was earning some money; he was a waiter by trade. Until the war broke out. Some houses were being built in Lodz, a little bit outside of the city. We paid some money and we got a three-room apartment there. At 11B Lokatorska Street, second floor. There was no window in the kitchen, but we had gas, it was modern, the bathroom was outside in the hallway. There were two families living on each floor. But I didn't like this apartment, I later moved to Zeromskiego Street in Lodz. It was a smarter street, better.

Our daughter, Halina [currently Halina Leszczynska], was born in 1929. There was such joy when she was born. I pampered her, spoiled her. I had great problems, she had this rash on her face. The doctor came and said that I should have a mask made of gauze and put some petroleum jelly on it, and you couldn't get it then. That's how it was. There was no stroller, just a large kerchief and that's how I carried her out for walks. And later they invented strollers and my husband's sister Roza bought me one in Sosnowiec.

When my baby was four months old, my husband decided I should stop working. He would come home from work very late and he would always bring a piece of cheesecake, make tea and I had to eat and drink that, so I'd have milk for the baby. My daughter started going to school [in the mid 1930s]. My husband wanted Halinka to go to a Jewish school. That's why she can speak Yiddish, because my husband and I spoke Yiddish to each other, but Polish to her.

Two times a year we'd go to her grandma in Sosnowiec. For the holidays. I'd always go for Easter, they'd have seder, there was matzah. They'd pray and pray, everything was told about how it was in Egypt, how they were thrown out, how long it all took, until the children fell asleep.

At that time the Chinese [Chinese door-to-door salesmen] were in Lodz, they were selling different things. My husband bought me a scarf, it was beige and green. And he asked me if I liked it. I said, 'Well, not very much.' So he said, 'I'll never buy you anything else in my life.' And he kept his word. Never, never did he buy me anything, not even for 5 groszy. He would never even go to the store with me. Absolutely. He was a very good man, he'd give away everything he had, he never needed anything, he was so honest it was foolish. Even to his closest friends [he never did anything dishonest]. There were these evening dances organized on Saturday nights, there was no way he would let his best friend in without a ticket.

There were lots of friends. There were always lots of people at my house and later, in Warsaw, until my husband's death [in 1966]. Although they all had more than I did, they'd always come to get something good. Almost all were unemployed, they'd always ask, 'Gucia, where is the yeast cake?' And they'd eat it without my permission. Once we left for the summer, I had a 10-liter bottle of cherry juice. They drank it all up and later wondered about what they'd say. They wanted to smash the bottle up [so it wouldn't look like they had drunk all the juice].

I went to a resort with the child in the summer. Near Lodz. To Wisniowa Gora. It was a large well-known resort. I went there each year, because my factory owners [the owners of the company where Mrs. Birencwajg worked] had a store there and I worked there. It was a cold cut store. And that's how life went on until the war.

### During the war

Then the war broke out in 1939 [2](#). My daughter was ten years old by then. I came back from a summer holiday [in Kolumna-Las, a town southeast of Lodz], it was in the morning, I heard this commotion in the hallway. I went out and asked about what had happened, 'You don't know anything? There's a war, the men are leaving to save Warsaw.' I stood there for a while, went up to the bed to wake my husband up: 'Dawid, get up, there's a war. People are going to the army.' And he said, 'Stop bugging me.' But I didn't give up and he had to wake up. He got up and said to me, 'Dress the child and let's go.'

So we went, we went outside to the gate. These high galoshes were in fashion then, with a zipper, but it was unbearably hot. So my husband said to me, 'Put on these shoes' [the galoshes]. I left the child with him, I started looking for them, I couldn't find them. As if they'd disappeared off the face of the earth. I went out, I told him I couldn't find them. My husband said, 'So stay, I'll go.' And he went.

He went, I stayed with the child, I didn't have a lot of money. I was lucky not to have gone with him. Because they would have trampled me with the child and we would have been lost. And he went and disappeared without a trace. I had a guilty conscience, I felt guilty that I had woken him up and he went away. I was hoping we'd meet after the war, but it was difficult to think about that. Bombs were flying over our heads. Very low. And you kept hearing about how they'd rape and take you for forced labor. The Germans were cruel. They had no mercy.

He came back after two months. I don't remember if it was more or less. You couldn't get bread by then, because they'd pull Jews out of a line, you had to wear a yellow patch [Jews were forced by German law to wear special patches or armbands on their clothing since fall 1939] [3](#) and it was very hard. When he came back, I told him, 'Listen, there's no point in you being here.' So he said, 'My two friends are crossing to the other side', that's how they'd say it, to the other side of the Bug [the River Bug, in eastern Poland, in the period 1939-1941 was the border between the General Governorship and the Soviet Union]. So I said, 'Go together with them.'

They arranged it somehow, I took a quilt, a pillow, I had a golden watch and something else made of gold and gave it to him, so he'd take it with him. He didn't want to. I told him, 'Take it, if it's hard for you [to carry], you can always throw it away, but when you get there, you may find it useful.'

When he went away, I didn't know if he was alive or not and I was left alone with this daughter of mine. A friend of mine helped me a bit, but it wasn't enough to feed ourselves. She was working in a factory [Plihal, an underclothes factory]. They made these knitted T-shirts there, very thin ones, quite expensive. And when the war broke out, they gave away the merchandise to the workers, so they'd sell it. She came to me and said, 'Listen Gucia, you have lots of acquaintances, take some of this and sell it.' Cela, that's how they called her, her last name was Krawiecka.

After a while the Germans came, these Volksdeutsche [4](#), asking about my husband. I said, 'He's not here.' So they told me to get out of the house. It was cold by then, we moved out of the apartment and I only asked them to let me take the feather quilt with me. I took it with me on my back, held the child by the hand and off we went. I decided I'd go to Warsaw. Because all these movements had begun in Lodz, they wanted all the Jews to be together. The Poles and the Germans started taking over the apartments. And you couldn't have access to it [to apartments].

So we went, the caretaker packed me into a train, because the trains were full then, it didn't matter then if you had the right to a ticket or not. They were overcrowded. But the caretaker somehow managed to squeeze me in there. We went to Warsaw. I had an address in Warsaw, on Gesia Street, but I can't remember the number... I spent one night there. We met an acquaintance there, who suggested that we go to Siedlce [approx. 90 km east of Warsaw] and stop there as her family.

We went to a village near Siedlce [a city approx. 100 km east of Warsaw]. I don't remember what it was called. Since that moment we were treated as Poles, refugees from Warsaw. Halina was so scared that she didn't leave the house at all. She was afraid of everything. I was the brave one, I used to go with the hostess [to sell things and earn money] to Miedzyrzec [Miedzyrzec Podlaski, approx. 50 km southeast of Siedlce], because it was in those parts. I would always tell her, 'Don't cry, I will be back in the evening.' I didn't know whether I would or wouldn't be back, I didn't know if something would happen along the way.

We found out that these village women cross over to the Soviet side [cross the border between the General Governorship and the Soviet Union]. I had arranged with my husband before that if, God willing, he'd be alive, I should look for him in Bialystok [a large city in eastern Poland, at the time Bialystok was on the Soviet side of the border] where he could get registered in a waiters' union, or in Lwow [today Ukraine, at the time on the Soviet side of the border]. We couldn't get a message from him, because my husband didn't know where we were. So we, my daughter Halina and I, decided to go there [to Bialystok and later, possibly, to Lwow].

So we went with those village women. They did it often, they had their ways. It all happened at night. They knew which place was best to cross. Some of these women were walking together, a man joined them and we walked in the forest. I only found out later that there was a brick factory there and there's usually a small pond next to every brick factory.

Halina was walking with me holding my hand and at some point my child goes - oops! I didn't know what was happening! I thought perhaps... I called: 'Excuse me, ma'am, please help me, my child is drowning!' And they said: 'Be quiet, you can't talk here, this is a border.' And they went on. But one woman turned round and helped me get the child out. Listen, I fell down because of nerves and for God's sake, she couldn't get me up. She said, 'Please get up, ma'am, please get up.' She somehow pulled me up and I got up. The child was out of the water by then... When we were leaving I bought her this thick sweat suit and a coat, for later, and all of this soaked up water...

We left that horrible road behind us and went to some farmer's. I went to have a drink of water and it turned out I had become speechless - couldn't say a word. We spent some time at that farmer's, later we had to go. This farmer was also afraid. It was very close to the border. He took us to the train station in Zareby Koscielne [approx. 50 km north of Siedlce, on the other side of the River Bug]. There were Red Army soldiers along the way, wearing those 'budenovkas.' [Editor's note: 'budenovka' - from the name of the Soviet marshal Semyon Mikhailovic Budyonny, the name for a high hat worn by Soviet soldiers, decorated with a large colorful star with a small metal star-emblem]. One of them yelled at this farmer that it was the border zone, that you couldn't drive any strangers around. And if he knew about this, because if not, then next time...

The train was supposed to arrive. Supposed. It was cold, raining, we were standing outside, the train finally arrived, there were more people like us there [refugees from the General Governorship who wanted to board the train], there were horrible scenes happening there, to board the train. I managed to get on and I was pushed into the toilet. There was no space to move there. I held the child close to me and I was standing there with her.

We reached Lwow. I met a militiaman who told me that a lot of the refugees were staying at the jail. There was this jail called Prygibki [correctly Brygidki, originally a nunnery of Saint Brygida's order of nuns, brought to Lwow in 1614. A male prison was organized there in 1782. After the Red Army entered Lwow in 1939 Brygidki became an NKVD prison], where the political prisoners were detained during 'sanacja' [6](#) and later people started living there, because there were so many cells.

We went there, but from the other side [that is, entered another institution located in the same building.] But this militiaman was waiting for us, he took us to MOPR [6](#). People were sleeping on the floor, on newspapers, paper, because there were lots of refugees and all told me: 'Why did you come here, there is no work, there are no apartments, there's nothing.'

I left my daughter in the care of other people who were staying there and went looking for my husband. I left and asked about the waiters' union - they were making fun of me. 'Are you kidding?! What union.' But there was this large hotel along the way. I looked, there were these two men that my husband had left with. I approached them, they were surprised, asked how I had gotten there. They said, 'We sent a courier to get our wives and it's been ten days and we don't have any news.' I said, 'Well, but where's Dawid?' They told me, 'Don't you worry, your husband is alive and well and he is working.' And they gave me the address where he was living.

Later, you had to sleep somewhere, after all. My husband rented an apartment, we slept on the floor, there were these huge cockroaches, and it cost 5 zloty a night. We managed to get used to all this somehow, we weren't so scared anymore and we found out that the brothers-in-law were there [from Mr. Birencwajg's side]. There were three of them and one sister-in-law with her husband, a young one. So there was a lot of joy, my husband's sister from Sosnowiec arrived several days later. [Dawid Birencwajg's sister, Bluma Poltorak with her husband and his brothers-in-law: Chaim Poltorak and Michal Malnowicer were staying in Lwow. Dawid Birencwajg's second sister, Rachela Majtlis, also came for a short time, but later left. Dawid's brother, Judka Birencwajg, was also found some time later.]

Meanwhile, they had started catching us for labor. That is - deportations! They deported us, but they said it was for work. My husband said, 'We can sign up for work.' I said I didn't want to... Some plants in Russia were recruiting employees and my husband said, 'Well. How long can this war last?'

Winter, summer, it will be over soon, we will go home.' My husband was only afraid to stay in the countryside. He wanted us to be in the city, because we were city folks. There was some agitator there who talked us into it, told us there'd be a city there, and what a city... [where they'd go]. And this city was a dump where a goat steered the traffic with its tail at the intersection.

We went to this city and those in-laws also went with us. Entire transports went there from Lwow. The city was called Vyksa, but it wasn't, God forbid, a district city, the district was Nizhny Novgorod. [Editor's note: Gorki and Nizhny Novgorod are two names for the same city. Until 1931 the city was called Nizhny Novgorod, in the period 1932-1991 Gorki, after 1991 the name Nizhny Novgorod was restored.]

So this was still in central Russia [approx. 350 km east of Moscow, on the Volga River]. It wasn't Siberia and it wasn't Kazakhstan, we were actually lucky. We didn't live in the town itself, you had to take a train to get to us. Our apartment was wooden, there were horrible bugs. I painted this apartment over and over, with lime, it even burned my hands. This was in 1940.

Meanwhile I gave birth to my second child [Cetka]. After eleven years. I went to work and they signed me up for the steelworks. They made pitchforks there, they had these automatic hammers and you had to turn this shovel quickly enough, so that these teeth would be cut out and you'd end up with a pitchfork. But I suffered from migraines all my life and I couldn't stand it there - this noise, this racket. I was working three shifts. I had a small child and they only had four weeks of so-called maternity leave.

I couldn't work in the steelworks. A doctor signed a certificate that I wasn't fit for this job. And then I met a woman, who was the headmistress of a nursery. She must have liked me. It was a week-nursery, that is, children would be left there for the entire week. She took me in and I worked there until the end of the war. The mothers were young, but they looked like grandmothers and I was amazed that such old women could have such small babies. But they were laying railroad tracks, carrying wooden planks. They all worked, so they looked like that.

I didn't have anything to dress my little daughter [baby Cetka] in, so I would hold her close to my body, so she wouldn't freeze, because sometimes it was minus 40 degrees [Celsius]. When I had the morning shift, I had to be at work at 7am. You couldn't be late. Not even a minute late. I was punished once in Russia. I had a plot of land, so I could plant some potatoes [a makeshift garden]. So I gathered some bread, traded it for potatoes and went to plant them. And then I remembered that I was supposed to leave for work! I got there and my director took my hand and led me somewhere. I didn't know what it was about. And she said that I was 20 minutes late. Twenty minutes, and they took away 20 percent of my salary for six months. In Russia it was impossible to just not go to work. If you didn't go to work once, you'd go to jail. You had to work. No getting around it.

I was working in the nursery, I made friends with those who were working there and they treated me very well. After some three years I went to Gorki. They delegated me to go there, because I had taught myself to read and write [in Russian]. They needed rice for the nursery and the director thought that since I was so worldly, she could send me there.

I found out in the city that the Union of Polish Patriots [ZPP] [7](#) was there. When I found out that there was such a union, I went to find out about it. And they told me that you had to have [a

member of the] intelligentsia to lead it. And there was a doctor, an engineer in our town, so that was intelligentsia. It all took place in our apartment. It all started then... UNRRA [8](#) also started helping.

Meanwhile this one brother-in-law [Maks Majtlis, husband of Rachela, Dawid Birencwajg's sister] went to Tashkent [capital of Uzbekistan], because it was warm there. [Editor's note: People deported into different regions of the USSR often tried to improve their conditions. Many tried to move to the southern republics of the USSR, where, according to unconfirmed rumors, conditions were supposedly easier]. He got a heatstroke there. Everyone went there, to Uzbekistan, because they thought it would be warm and there'd be fruit. And there was a typhus epidemic.

The second one [Chaim Poltorak, husband of Laja, Dawid Birencwajg's sister] went to Kosciuszko's army [The 1st Kosciuszko Infantry Division] [9](#), the third one [Judka Birencwajg, Dawid's brother] stayed with us. We didn't move, but my sister-in-law with her husband [Bluma Poltorak, Dawid Birencwajg's sister, with her husband] left when the German-Russian War [10](#) broke out. And I think they died later... They disappeared without a trace. My husband broke his leg, so we couldn't think about going anywhere.

When the war broke out, Jews started coming from Vilnius, from Lithuania, but they'd leave at once [further on, usually south]. They didn't like it. Small town. And hunger. Well, you wouldn't die of it, but it was very hard. These food rations were not sufficient and you had to stand in line for a long time to get them.

I was working, keeping house, I would go to the market, you could only get something for bread. My husband was working for the railroad, so he'd get bread in loaves. 1 kilo 20 decagrams. So he'd eat the 20 decagrams, some soup and bring this entire loaf home, so we could trade it at the market. We needed some milk for the baby. And some potatoes, because there was nothing more to eat. The younger child was growing up, she could only speak Russian.

## Post-war

The day when I found out the war was over... or rather the night: We had these loudspeakers, they would never be turned off. There was an announcement at night. We started trying to go back to Poland. We submitted the papers [to the repatriation committee] and the day came when we went home. It was a cattle wagon. To heat that wagon, there was a small heater there with a pot of water standing on top of the heater. Someone moved that pot and the water spilled on my leg. We were traveling for four weeks and I was in those wagons with that leg. Whenever there were any stations, we'd go to a medical point and someone would make these makeshift wound dressings. And we traveled and traveled until we reached Poland.

I only remember that the train was supposed to stop in Wroclaw [a city 350 km west of Warsaw]. We stopped in Lodz along the way. We got off the train for a moment [in Lodz] and then we got back on and went further. People started getting off after we passed Wroclaw. And I kept sitting. Everyone had a designated place to go. The Regained Territories [11](#). People didn't worry about that, they got off wherever they wanted. But my husband said he wouldn't. Because he would go where they told him to.

In Pieszyce those who were already there went looking for their [family members] after such trains arrived. [Editor's note: Pieszyce, a town approx. 50 km southwest of Wroclaw. In the middle ages it was known as Pieszyce, later, when it was part of Germany as Peterswald, after WWII the town became a part of Poland again as Piotrolesie. In 1947 the name Pieszyce was restored.] And this brother-in-law of ours [Chaim Poltorak], the one who was in the army, came to the station! He was there as a military settler. That means that he was in the army, later when he left the army he got this farm which used to belong to the Germans. What great happiness, he said, 'I'll take you from here.'

My husband, of course, didn't want to go with him, he wanted to go where they told him to. I said, 'If you want to, then stay here, I'll take the children and go.' [Editor's note: the station where they were supposed to get off was even further than Pieszyce and Dawid, who was strict about following orders, insisted he would not get off the train in Pieszyce]. But he didn't let me get off alone. So we all got off.

The brother-in-law gave us a room [in Pieszyce] in a wooden house which used to belong to the Germans, no toilet, no water, nothing. He said, 'You sleep here, I'll bring you bread and milk in the morning.' I put the children to sleep, there was no light, I woke up in the morning waiting for that bread and milk and there was nothing. Nothing. No bread, no brother-in-law. I said to my husband, 'You know, let's leave the children here, go out into the street and perhaps we can find someone we know.' Although my husband was a very resolute and stubborn man, he let me talk him into it.

We went out, there were lots of people from Lodz there and, somehow, there was no more happiness. They told us there was a committee there [the Central Committee of Polish Jews] [12](#) which helps, distributes food rations. And this brother-in-law appeared after some two or three weeks. He came, I didn't even ask about the milk, and said, 'Come, I'll take you to a different place, a better apartment.'

It was on Bieruta Street. A lot of apartments there were taken up by people from Lodz. One had a luxurious house, one had two rooms with a kitchen and this brother-in-law showed me a room with a kitchen, but there was water there, there was a toilet. Everything there had been lost due to 'szaber' ['szaber' was the looting by the local residents of the possessions left behind by the previous residents, in the case of Lower Silesia - the Germans]. The mattresses were torn, everything. I took a broom and started cleaning up a bit, sweeping.

Then my husband came and asked, 'What are you doing here?' I said, 'Chaim gave us this apartment, so I'm cleaning up a bit.' 'Leave everything right this minute and get out.' 'Why?' 'Because it's not yours. Don't touch anything and leave.' I said, 'You know what, I won't leave. I won't leave this place.' Because I had two beds, there was a cot as well, there were no owners, there wasn't much more, but you could live there. And finally he knew he couldn't fight me any longer, so he gave up.

And that's where I settled with my husband and children. There were children in the city and they started organizing a nursery. Because I had worked at a nursery in Russia, they took me as the director, to organize that nursery, because nobody knew how to go about it. You see, nurseries did not exist before the war. I organized it, there was a doctor there who was a Jew, and I took in young children, under three years of age, I organized the staff and it was all very good. This was in Piotrolesie. Near Dzierzoniow. [Editor's note: Mrs. Birencwajg is referring to Pieszyce].

I worked there for some two or three years, I don't remember exactly. This orphanage for [Jewish] children was next to the nursery, they picked these children up in the forests. They were alone. The director asked me to transfer to that orphanage, as the hostess. His name was Kozlowski. He later died in Israel. Anyway, I transferred there and worked as hostess. And my husband was working in a boiler-room in a factory.

One day my husband went to Warsaw, he found many friends there who told him they'd get him a job. I was very happy, he had already left, I stayed behind. He finally wrote me that we could come. Well, I started packing, we had some pots and pans, perhaps something else, so I took what I could.

My older daughter was in gymnasium in Dzierzoniow, but because she had gone to a Russian school in Russia, and she didn't manage to get much of an education before the war, she decided she wouldn't leave that gymnasium. And so she spent the year in Dzierzoniow, she lived in a dormitory. And later she went to a college preparatory school. Those were two-year schools. They gave you a secondary school certificate and the possibility of entering university without having to pass additional exams. And she left for Wroclaw. And we were by then in Warsaw and she stayed one more year in Wroclaw, also in a dormitory.

When I arrived in Warsaw, I had a room with a shared kitchen. After a while we got a different apartment, on Madalinskiego Street, two rooms and a kitchen. I started working in a preschool on Parkowa Street. They needed to set up a nursery for women who were working at the ministry of security [Ministry of Security, slang name for the Security Office (UB)] [13](#). I organized a nursery on Chocimska Street and all the women who were working at the ministry and had small children left them in that nursery. I managed to arrange everything that was needed and it was very difficult to do. But when I'd say I was from the ministry of security, I'd get everything I needed [as the employees of the Security Office were privileged, also with regards to provisions]. And this nursery was a very high class one.

Later, there was also a walk-in children's clinic next to the hospital on Woloska Street [hospital of the Ministry of Internal Affairs] and they needed a nursery there. So they took me to that hospital and I organized a nursery.

My daughter Halina got married in 1951. To Jan Leszczynski. So I organized a party. They started living with me. Both were students, they didn't have any money, we didn't have much either. And that's how it went. In 1951 our grandson was born, Włodzimierz Leszczynski. He was born on 24th December, at 3.30pm. Just like Jesus. [Editor's note: it is not known exactly at what time Jesus was born]. There was no public transport from where we were living to Woloska Street. So I had to walk to work... You couldn't even get a stroller, nothing, so I walked with this baby to work and from work. I was really close to that child. Closer than to my own.

They lived with me for some four years. Later Halina's husband got an apartment, but this kid was so fond of us, on Saturdays and Sundays my husband couldn't go anywhere without him. They would go to the museum, to the park, to visit friends... I have to tell you that my grandson and great-grandson went to the cemetery with me some time ago and my grandson said, 'We really did walk a lot with Grandpa...' He remembered everything.

My second daughter, Cetka, graduated from nursing school. She worked at the Physician's House [a care facility for elderly physicians] at a hospital, as a nurse, later as the director. She retired after 38 years of working in the same place. She got married young. I have to say I didn't like this husband, but she liked him very much and his parents, Poles, wanted them to get married very much. They really loved my daughter. But she also got divorced and she had a daughter.

And that's how life went, my husband was working [as the head chef of the canteen in the hospital on Woloska Street, later in the Stolica building corporation], not earning much and I would say, 'Listen, I don't have enough to make ends meet.' And he'd say, 'If you keep talking like this I'll get a job that pays even less than this one.' So there was nothing to talk about. I really suffered, I never loaned money. However much I had, that's what I lived for.

One evening my husband felt ill, but it quickly passed. Some time later he also wasn't feeling well, the paramedics came and pronounced a heart attack, it turned out it was his second one. But he was the kind of man who didn't worry about his health. I organized his 60th birthday party and told him, 'Go see a doctor.' 'Oh, there's no need to see a doctor, I don't go to any doctors.' He had a third heart attack at night and they took him to hospital.

I went there to visit him, I visited him a day before he died. He didn't feel he was dying. He took his [false] teeth out, because they got broken somehow and told me, 'Go, have them repaired and bring them back at once.' I said, 'They won't do it at once, maybe in the morning.' He said, 'Well, so bring me those teeth back in the morning.' In the morning, at 7am, there was a phone call from the hospital. My husband was in great pain, he didn't call the night doctor, some woman doctor came and gave him a shot to the heart. They didn't have the kind of treatment then as they do today. This was in 1966. So he died.

I was left alone in the apartment. How old was Wlodek [Halina's son] by then? He was in 9th grade, so 15 years old. Halina, his mother, was divorced by then. And Wlodek said to me, 'Grandma, perhaps we can live together, it would be merrier for us.' So he talked me into it, I agreed to have our two apartments exchanged for one larger one.

So since that time we've live together like this. When my daughter was working, I was taking care of the house, buying things, doing everything, it was all good. But one day I was washing the kitchen window and the stool slipped from underneath me. I fell, I hit my head on the cupboard. The doctor came and joked with me, 'Did you manage to finish washing that window?' So he told me to lie down, but there were no good results and I went to the ophthalmologist at the hospital. When I got there, he told me that my one eye was already gone. They treated me, I kept going in and out of hospital, when these lasers were created, they operated on me then. But I lost my eyesight completely anyway.

Some physician operated on me three years ago, gave me some hope, but nothing came out of it. I can't see anything. And they have to care for me night and day. My old age pension is 950 zloty. My daughter gets 1100 zloty [a typical monthly salary in Poland is approx. 2500 zloty] and that's how we live together. I keep getting weaker, but I am not surprised, because everyone says that for my age I still look good. I still danced on my 90th birthday.

One daughter got divorced, the second one got divorced, each one had one child and they raised them alone. Each of them has a higher education, I have a grandson who graduated from two

faculties [Wlodek Leszczynski, Halina's son] and this grandson really respects me. I tell him, 'Stop it with this grandma.' But he says, 'No, I want to have a grandma, because my friends don't have grandmas and they're jealous.'

I can't say much about Jews being persecuted by Poles, because no one ever offended me or anything. Even during the occupation [WWII], Poles helped me, although they didn't know me. Perhaps it wasn't obvious that I was Jewish. Perhaps I had a different face. But I know that after the war people wanted to go back to their apartments, see how they looked, remember, and [Poles] wouldn't let them in. That's how it was. We have Polish neighbors, we can't have any others, because we're the only Jewish family here and I don't know what they say about us at home. But on the outside it's all nice, polite. But I know anti-Semitism was, is and will be. It's those old ones passing it on to the young.

I had this case some three years ago. I was sitting on Malczewskiego Street [in Warsaw], sitting on a bench and my daughter went into the store. Another woman was sitting next to me. Then another one sits down, pushes herself between us and says to this other one, 'Do you know, this scoundrel is coming?' I was listening, thinking what scoundrel are they talking about? And she says, 'You don't know who I'm talking about? It's this rabbi from America.' I turned around and said, 'I am Jewish. Do you think I'd let myself call a priest a scoundrel?' And at this moment she went speechless. My daughter came out of the store, I got up and went away without saying anything. Because if I had told my daughter anything, she would have made a commotion.

Later here, in the yard, there was a woman sitting on a bench, she recently moved in, she didn't know who I was. She told me, 'I can recognize every Jew.' I asked, 'And how do you recognize them?' 'I just can' - she insisted. So I said, 'Do you recognize me? Because I'm Jewish too.' She was dumbstruck, started talking about how many good things she did for Jews during the war, for the ghetto. I said, 'What you did is what you did, but what you said, you also said.' I made sure not to run into her for a longer time. Later she started talking to me in a friendly manner, so I didn't hold a grudge.

When all these events started taking place [in the 1960s] [14](#), my daughter [Halina] was working at the Joachim Lelewel high school in Zoliborz [district of Warsaw]. My daughter told me, 'Mama, perhaps we should leave?' I said, 'I won't leave.' Those friends who had left didn't get in touch with us. So I was feeling kind of offended. And my grandson was at an age that I was afraid they'd draft him into the army, some tragedy would happen and I'd have a guilty conscience until the end of my life.

My husband didn't allow me to respect [Jewish] tradition. Before the war he was in the freethinkers' union. Because tradition is connected to religion, he threw the baby out with the bath water. When Wlodek was born, in 1951, these Christmases started. And all these Polish holidays, my children celebrate them. They're not as official, but they do celebrate them. Why Polish holidays - because you get a day off, you don't go to work. And my granddaughter's husband cannot imagine that we could not meet for Christmas Eve [the evening preceding Christmas Day, 24th December, is celebrated in Poland]. Although at our house we don't sing Christmas carols on Christmas Eve, just turn on the record and listen. But there are all the dishes; the Christmas tree is the most important and everyone gets presents. That's what really counts.

For example my second daughter [Cetka] doesn't know the Jewish language at all, she doesn't know any holidays, because with Halina, before the war, I'd go to her grandmother [Dawid Birencwajg's mother] to Sosnowiec twice a year. And she witnessed all the [Jewish] holiday celebrations there. My granddaughter [Cetka's daughter, Kasia] knows who she is, she doesn't hide it. Of course she does not go out on the street and shout, 'I'm mixed.' But she also doesn't know anything Jewish. There is no community, so how is she supposed to know it. There isn't. No, there isn't.

We don't go to church. Halina's husband was a Catholic, the grandchildren were not baptized, the second daughter also had a Polish husband, my grandson married a Pole, so did my granddaughter, so we're very mixed by now. But both children and grandchildren know who they are. They never had any church weddings. Wlodek, my grandson, whose mother is Jewish, considers himself to be a Jew. Halina only asked him several years ago, 'When they ask you what nationality you are, what do you answer?' He answers that he is a Polish Jew.

There used to be a Jewish community in Warsaw. My husband's friends used to come and speak Yiddish, my daughter's friends would visit her... we'd go to Jewish clubs, always on the anniversary of the ghetto uprising [14](#), we'd go to the monument [Heroes of the Ghetto Monument in Warsaw]. My grandson still feels he must go there, that has remained. And I used to have very many friends. My own friends, from before the war. Unfortunately, they've all passed away. Only one is left and she's not right in the head. [During the editing of the interview also this friend of Mrs. Birencwajg's died.]

Jews are wise and clever. So many learned people have come from the Jewish nation. And all my grandchildren are educated, my granddaughter has a Master's degree in computer science and my grandson, he knows so many languages! And my great-grandson and my great-granddaughters! I am so stupid compared to them. My grandchildren never told me, 'Grandma, tell us.' The story is too long. They're still young. Perhaps with time I'll tell them everything, how it was during the occupation.

## Glossary

### **1 Cossacks**

An ethnic group that constituted something of a free estate in the 15th-17th centuries in the Polish Republic and in the 16th-18th centuries in the Muscovite state (and then Russia). The Cossacks in the Polish Republic consisted of peasants, townspeople and nobles settled along the banks of the Lower Dnieper, where they organized armed detachments initially to defend themselves against the Tatar invasions and later themselves making forays against the Tatars and the Turks. As part of the armed forces, the Cossacks played an important role in Russia's imperial wars in the 17th-20th centuries. From the 19th century onwards, Cossack troops were also used to suppress uprisings and independence movements. During the February and October Revolutions in 1917 and the Russian Civil War, some of the Cossacks (under Kaledin, Dutov and Semyonov) supported the Provisional Government, and as the core of the Volunteer Army bore the brunt of the fighting with the Red Army, while others went over to the Bolshevik side (Budenny). In 1920 the Soviet authorities disbanded all Cossack formations, and from 1925 onwards set about liquidating the Cossack identity. In 1936 Cossacks were permitted to join the Red Army, and some Cossack

divisions fought under its banner in World War II. Some Cossacks served in formations collaborating with the Germans and in 1945 were handed over to the authorities of the USSR by the Western Allies.

## **2 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.

## **3 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).

## **4 Volksdeutscher (ethnic German)**

Early 18th century German colonists from southern German states (Baden-Würtemberg, Bavaria) who settled, on the encouragement of the Habsburg emperor, in the sparsely populated parts of the Habsburg Empire - especially in southern Hungary. Thanks to their advanced agricultural technologies and hard work they became some of the wealthiest peasants in Hungary. Most of them lived (and partly still live) in Tolna and Baranya counties in present-day Hungary, Baranja in Croatia, Vojvodina in present-day Serbia and the Banat in Romania. After the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, following World War I, many of them came under Yugoslav and Romanian rule on the territories disannexed from Hungary on the basis of the Trianon Peace Treaty.

## **5 Sanacja**

Sanacja was a coalition political movement in Poland in the interwar years. It was created in 1926 by Józef Piłsudski. It was a wide movement created to support 'moral sanitation' of the society and the politics in Poland prior to and after the May coup d'état of 1926. Named after the Latin word for sanitation (sanatio), the movement was formed primarily by former military officers disgusted with

the corrupt nature of Polish politics. It represented a coalition of members from the right, the left, and centrists. Its main focus was to eliminate corruption within Poland and to minimize inflation.

## **6 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.

## **7 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.

## **8 UNRRA, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration**

An international organization created on 9th March 1943 in Washington, which organized aid for allied countries, which were the most devastated by the war, in the period 1944-1947.

## **9 The 1st Kosciuszko Infantry Division**

Tactical grouping formed in the USSR from May 1943. The victory at Stalingrad and the gradual assumption of the strategic initiative by the Red Army strengthened Stalin's position in the anti-fascist coalition and enabled him to exert increasing influence on the issue of Poland. In April 1943, following the public announcement by the Germans of their discovery of mass graves at Katyn, Stalin broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile and using the Poles in the USSR, began openly to build up a political base (the Union of Polish Patriots) and an army: the 1st Kosciuszko Infantry Division numbered some 11,000 soldiers and was commanded first by General Zygmunt Berling (1943-44), and subsequently by the Soviet General Bewziuk (1944-45). In August 1943 the division was incorporated into the 1st Corps of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, and from March 1944 was part of the Polish Army in the USSR. The 1st Division fought at Lenino on 12-13 October 1943, and in Praga in September 1944. In January 1945 it marched into Warsaw, and in

April-May 1945 it took part in the capture of Berlin. After the war it became part of the Polish Army.

## **10 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.

## **11 Regained Lands**

Term describing the eastern parts of Germany (Silesia, Pomerania, Eastern Prussia, etc.) annexed to Poland after World War II, following the Teheran and Yalta agreements between the allies. After 1945 Germans were expelled from the area, and Poles (as well as Jews to some extent) from the former Polish lands annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939 were settled in their place. A Polonization campaign was also waged - place names were altered, Protestant cemeteries were destroyed, etc. The Society for the Development of the Western Lands (TRZZ), founded in 1957, organized propaganda campaigns justifying the right of the Polish state to the territories, popularizing the social, economic and cultural transformations, and advocating integration with the rest of the country.

## **12 Central Committee of Polish Jews**

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.

## **13 Office for Public Security, UBP**

Popularly known as the UB, officially established to protect the interests of national security, but in fact served as a body whose function was to stamp out all forms of resistance during the establishment and entrenchment of communist power in Poland. The UB was founded in 1944. Branches of the UBP were set up immediately after the occupation by the Red Army of the Polish lands west of the Bug. The first UBP functionaries were communist activists trained by the NKVD, and former soldiers of the People's Army and members of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR). In many cases they were also collaborationists from the period of German occupation and criminals. The senior officials were NKVD officers. The primary tasks of the UBP were to crush all underground organizations with a western orientation. In 1956 the Security Service was formed and many former officers of the UBP were transferred.

## **14 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.

### **15 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (or April Uprising)**

On 19th April 1943 the Germans undertook their third deportation campaign to transport the last inhabitants of the ghetto, approximately 60,000 people, to labor camps. An armed resistance broke out in the ghetto, led by the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) and the Jewish Military Union (ZZW) - all in all several hundred armed fighters. The Germans attacked with 2,000 men, tanks and artillery. The insurrectionists were on the attack for the first few days, and subsequently carried out their defense from bunkers and ruins, supported by the civilian population of the ghetto, who contributed with passive resistance. The Germans razed the Warsaw ghetto to the ground on 15th May 1943. Around 13,000 Jews perished in the Uprising, and around 50,000 were deported to Treblinka extermination camp. About 100 of the resistance fighters managed to escape from the ghetto via the sewers.