

# Rozalia Unger

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Szczecin

Poland

Interviewer: Anna Szyba

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Mrs. Unger is a cheerful, nice old lady. We meet in her tiny apartment in Szczecin. The single room is very modestly furnished. A large picture of her children hangs on the wall. Mrs. Unger is convinced she has nothing to say, but she still welcomes me warmly. Though her answers are laconic, as that is her way of talking, I still find many stories worth recording in her account.

I was born on 30th July 1917 in Cracow, but I grew up in Rzeszow [a town ca. 160 km east of Cracow]. I come from a working-class family. My mother's name was Malka Achtman, née Szapiro. I know nothing about my mother's father, her mother's name was Bajla, and she lived with us. [I remember] grandma as an old lady, she barely walked. She was religious – always wore a kerchief! For Yom Kippur, she wore that bead thing on her head to commemorate the holiday. She died in Rzeszow, when she started transporting Jews away for liquidation [1](#), she couldn't walk so the Germans shot her in the street.

My mother had two brothers. Their last name was Szapiro, but I don't remember their first names, neither one's. One [lived] in Zawiercie [a town 50 km east of Katowice], and one in London. I have here a photo [of one of my maternal uncle's family] that we found in England after the war. My mother was still young, she was 47 when she died [so she was born around 1895], they were older. I don't know where my mother was born, I know they lived in a place called Szczekociny [a small town 80 km east of Katowice], it was somewhere in Silesia, near Sosnowiec, or thereabout.

The [maternal] uncle who lived in England had emigrated there a long, long time before the war, to work, most likely, he was a cap maker. He sent us English pounds to provide for the family. He was very religious, reportedly had eight children in London. I've never met them. I don't even know whether his wife was Jewish. I suppose so, because it's typical for Jews to marry only with Jews.

My mother's second brother was a hat maker. He was very religious too, and I remember, after I had been released from prison [ca. 1934], my mother sent me to Zawiercie [a town 270 km south-west of Warsaw] to him, his wife, my aunt, met me, but I had a sleeveless dress, and Jews aren't allowed to bare their arms, so she gave me a scarf so that I could say hello to him, because I have bare arms so he won't talk to me. They had no children of their own, only two adopted girls, Jews. I knew they had been taught to sew, to care for themselves, perhaps they were earning for their maintenance that way, I don't know. I remember they lived on the second floor, in a brick house. And the shop was there too. I don't know whether Aunt worked too. I remember nothing from Zawiercie either because I was there for only a very short time – just a couple of days. I know the older daughter once took me somewhere to some people to entertain me. But I didn't open my mouth, one thing that I was young, the other that those were people I didn't know.

I know little [about my mother]. I don't know whether she went to any school, I'm afraid she could neither read nor write, but I'm not sure. She had to provide for four persons, because I don't remember my father, he reportedly went missing. Above all, I remember my mother selling a lot of things in a pawnshop to provide for us, and I no longer see those things. There was that plush tablecloth, maroon-red with golden stitching. The same thing on the beds and on the table. And on top of that was also a kind of mesh, the whole thing was obviously valuable, because she sold it. But generally what did she do for a living? It depended, but, as I understand it, she grabbed every opportunity that appeared. I remember, for instance, that she dealt in fruit: if someone had an orchard, a couple of trees or a whole orchard, she'd make a deal with them in the spring or in the autumn, I don't remember, and when the fruit were ripe, she'd have them picked up, she didn't do that herself, and sell them; the retailers bought from her.

There were, I remember, those tiny little apples, called the 'cocks,' and she'd rent a cellar from someone (we had a basement, but it was no good for that) and pickle cabbage there, and those apples in that cabbage, they were the best variety for that. When already pickled, those apples had a sort of gas in them, very refreshing, like soda water, and flavored. People came and bought it. There was a whole barrel of the stuff, I remember once the barrel was so large they couldn't take it out of the cellar and people went down there and [bought] as much as they wanted. Those were the sort of things we lived on, but the money from that was just pennies, really.

My mother was religious, but already adapted to the modern times, because otherwise it would have been hard to survive. She lit the candles on Friday night, wore a wig on a Saturday, but not everyday, so she wore a kerchief, because you weren't allowed to show your hair. I know she went to synagogue, but only for the high holidays, that was obviously a religious dictate, there was a separate space for women, a separate one for men. I see the synagogue in my mind's eye, but I don't remember the address [2](#). I think I never visited the place, you didn't take children there, I guess, and later I was a communist, so it would have even been a dishonor to go to a synagogue - we were atheists.

My father's name was Salomon. I know nothing about him to this day, I didn't know him at all. I know nothing about his family either. I know only that once [my mother's] brother came, whether from England or from Zawiercie, to attend to the formalities associated with [my parents'] divorce. But I was a kid, no one cared about me, asked or told me anything.

There were two of us, the kids. My brother was a year and half younger than me. His name was Mojzesz, a Biblical name, and I was Biblical too, my name was Rachela. There was nothing to play. He was in the cheder, he went there every day, but he wore no payes. I don't know where he went later, certainly some elementary school. During the summer holidays we did nothing, and what could we do, no one organized any kind of shows or activities for young people - there was nothing of the sort! There were no summer camps. Who ever spoke of a summer camp? It was good if we had enough to eat at home.

Then [my brother] went to work, he was a bag maker, he went to Bielsko-Biala [a town ca. 60 km south of Katowice]. He worked there for a German Jew who had been deported before the war back to Poland [3](#), he was a bag maker, had a store, had some money, set up a shop, and gave [my brother] a job there. The two of them regularly went to France to buy new things, bags, suitcases, tools.

We lived in Rzeszow at 5 Lwowska Street. It was a tenement house, but in the back. The owner was a Jew, and the janitor a Pole. The apartment had one room, a large one, so we divided it up in half: two beds. My brother had his own, because he had to sleep separately, and I slept either with my mother or my grandmother. And that was it: a kitchen stove, a table. There was no bathroom, no one had a bathroom, typically there was even no running water, but as far as we were concerned, I remember my mother had a deal with the next-house neighbors who had a well, and if you wanted to use the well, you had to pay, but I think my mother didn't pay, simply because there were two kids, and the grandma, for her to provide for, so [the neighbors] didn't charge her.

There was a workshop in the yard, the employees were Poles. A scrap dealer, the owner was a Jew. I don't know what they did in that workshop, I wasn't interested. Lwowska wasn't solely a Jewish street, it ran down to Wislok, the river. Opposite [our house] stood a Polish elementary school, a single-story building.

The pre-war Rzeszow was a small town, very many people were jobless, there was a lot of poverty. Life was hard, poor, simply. I remember one [man] who had a store, on Panska Street, I think it was, selling bathtubs, water closets, obviously for those building or renovating their house. So there were people who could afford that.

There were stalls, stores, tiny ones, I remember a little store that sold a bit of everything, and next door there was a beautiful Christian store, the wooden floors were greased, whether with wood tar or some brown polish, so the peasants, when they came to do their shopping, with those cloth bundles on their backs, instead of going [to the Christian store], they preferred to go to the Jewish one, lest they spoil the floor [in the elegant one]. My mother sent me to the Jewish store to buy things on credit, whatever we needed on an everyday basis, whether flour or sugar, I paid nothing, only my mother would come after some time and pay the bill.

We spoke Yiddish at home. But I speak it no longer. Have no one to speak it to, forgotten. I understand it when spoken to me, but I can't speak or read it. We spent the holidays at home, because we had no other family. My mother observed all the holiday rituals, today it makes me laugh, the division between the milk and meat dishes, the whole thing. The kitchen was absolutely kosher! It couldn't be otherwise! They would have cursed [my mother and grandmother] if they had done that, but they were used to that, everyone did that so they observed it too.

For Easter [Pesach], you had to change all the dishes. And we kept the holiday dishes, unused, separately in a chest, and if someone didn't, they had to scald the everyday ones, and then you could use them for the holidays. They lived the Jewish way, simple as that! But being strictly religious - no, that wasn't the case. And especially when I was already able to tell, after I had been released from prison, I remember a situation once, you weren't allowed to touch money on Saturday, and my mother once noticed me touching it, and she said nothing. That meant she had already adapted herself. She preferred to pretend she had seen nothing rather than reproach me.

I remember the peasant strikes, I could have been 9 or 10 at the time, then the funeral of Orbach [a less known communist activist in the 1930s], a Jewish funeral, and the communists pulling the covering off [from the coffin], people carried the coffin on their backs, and covering it with a red cloth instead. I remember a massive crowd, because the way to the Jewish cemetery was down our street, Lwowska, and people [lost] a lot of money, they were hiding in the gateways, I don't know whether it was from the police or for some other reason, and I went picking up that money, those

pennies. Orbach was a communist, they killed him in prison, punched his lungs. I knew his younger brother. It was the time when Pilsudski [4](#) set up the camp at Bereza Kartuska [5](#) and there, in Bereza, Orbach's younger brother caught tuberculosis, I don't know how, whether they beat him or whatever happened there, whether it was the food, enough that he had developed the tuberculosis and was released. I remember money was being raised among young people to pay for a sanatorium for him in Krynica or Zakopane.

I completed seven grades in a girls' school, a mixed one [for both Jews and Christians]. We played all together, there was no problem. There was a religion teacher, a Jewess, religion was taught in Yiddish. There were [also] schools for boys, nearby, on the same street, I don't know how it was there, my brother went there. Upon completing elementary school I wanted to go to a business high school, but that cost something 45 zlotys, my mother told me, 'Write your uncle in England, he'll send you the money,' and that ended the story, he was supporting us anyway.

I went to work, for three years, to learn a trade. The people that gave me the job were Jews, and they were also communist sympathizers. There was some favoritism involved. I worked in a private tailor-making shop, we sewed dresses, blouses. I worked there as an apprentice. And other girls worked there [too] simply for nothing. Why for nothing? Because they wanted to go to Palestine, to Israel, and they needed a profession. They usually didn't speak Hebrew. Young people generally didn't know the language, few did. The religious Jews learned Hebrew, I don't know whether they knew what the prayers they recited meant, whether they understood the words - this is something they know, but young people weren't religious, like they aren't these days.

I joined the party [6](#) because the economic situation, the living conditions in a way segregated us, made us part of a certain sphere, even though in the party - I was in the youth organization - there were also students from well-off families, cultural, educated, up-to-scratch people. (I didn't think about joining the Jewish party). The Bund [7](#) had similar principles but a different goal. We worked with the Poles and the Jews, both were represented in the party. I remember no anti-Semitic behavior; there was nothing of the sort between young people. We were all equal, none of us had anything.

The meetings were all hush-hush, each time in a different place, at somebody's home. Above all, we studied. We couldn't have books because we might get caught, but there were educated people who knew how to pass knowledge on to us. [Everyone had their responsibilities] and mine area of responsibility were leaflets for the military. I don't know where they printed the stuff - you weren't allowed to know, it was top secret. Those were leaflets they distributed among soldiers. They spoke the truth - I don't remember precisely what they said, it's too many years, but they spoke the truth about the situation in the country, about poverty, indigence. My job was to deliver [those prints] to the military barracks. I faced a very harsh prison sentence if I got caught. My military contact, his name was Rajber, is dead now. They organized 1st May demonstrations [May Day, a holiday established by the Second International, celebrated annually with mass rallies, demonstrations, and marches], but on a very low key, and I don't remember how it looked like. I remember pasting up posters on the wall, whether for 1st May or something else.

When I was 17, they arrested 36 people from the past. This could have been 1934 or 1935. Somebody betrayed us. I don't remember who it was. I met my husband during the trial; he got two and a half years and served it. I also served time, but they released me after a year because I was

the youngest.

We did time in Rzeszow, then they moved us to Tarnow [a town ca. 75 km west of Rzeszow], it was the time of the peasant strikes. I remember looking out of the window and seeing how they drove their wagons, with the torches, in the night. I was in a cell with other women. They treated us better or worse. They didn't really beat us, but the boys they did. There, in front of our windows, was a boulevard. People sat there. And we shouted, when the guards started beating the boys, for them to stop. So that the people knew how things were.

They released me before Easter, and after the holidays the trial began. I remember [one of the defendants] was sick in his lungs, had tuberculosis, and someone from his family gave me a ham sandwich for him. Two slices of bread with a lot of ham in between, and I brought it to the courtroom and gave it to him.

After the trial I spent a couple of days in Zawiercie, because my mother sent me there to stay with the brother [of hers], to isolate me. But there was no work there so I packed my things and left for Cracow. I remember I paid 8 zlotys for a room I shared with another [girl]. I don't remember where I knew her from but she was a communist too. In Cracow, I lived in various places. Above all, you had to pay. Not much, but the places weren't special either. I remember I once shared a room with a girl who worked in a creamery below and I couldn't breathe because of the lactic acid, and I found out it was her who had soaked through with it. The owner was a religious man who liked to peep at girls washing themselves. His wife knew about it and stood by the sink to cover us. He must have been after a stroke - he had a limp in one leg and a stiff arm.

I was an illegal, unregistered resident in Cracow. There was an organization there [Patronat, founded 1908], run by Sempolowska, I guess, [Stefania Sempolowska, 1870-1944, teacher, activist, involved in organizing aid for political prisoners, harassed by the authorities] that helped political prisoners, distributed foreign aid, from France, things that people needed. I received a pair of shoes, light-colored ones, very nice, oxfords.

I spent perhaps two years in Cracow. When there was work, I worked. I once worked for a tailor that made vests and my job was making the buttonholes, and to this day I can make a very nice buttonhole. The better I performed, the more money I got, but those were only temporary jobs. I wrote to my mother, sent her 10 zlotys from time to time. My brother also kept in touch with her like that [sending her money].

Then my husband came and we moved in together [Mr. and Mrs. Unger got married during the war, around 1941], there was a bridge beyond the Planty park, and beyond the bridge was Grzegorzewska Street, and there we lived at no. 8. The apartment had three rooms, and the owner, an obviously impoverished Jew, sold shoes, had a store somewhere, the store eventually move to the apartment, and he sold there, and one room he rented to us. We paid for that room, but then the war broke out and we left the place. I took the pillowcase, stuffed whatever fit inside, the basic things, and off we went. You thought it was just for a moment, that the war would not last long.

My husband, Oskar Unger, comes from a village near Rzeszow called Lubenia [15 km south of Rzeszow]. He was born in 1912, I guess, in peasant Jewish family, there were thirteen children, that's the way it was those days; Jews didn't do abortions. I knew my husband's parents, the father was very religious, carried a beard, but that's not what I mean but how he lived. They lived in the

countryside, and throughout the countryside wandered people, religious ones too. I don't know whether it was in the name of God or whatever. But if someone came, you had to give him food, water, whatever, and give him a place to sleep for the night. [My husband's father] had a special little room for that and he never told the pilgrim to go away but slept him there. He even gave him food to eat, those were the customs, different than today.

They had two acres of land, one cow, and thirteen children, one looked after the other, and of all that the only ones to survive were my husband and an orphan boy [my husband's] father had adopted, his name was Alman Intrater. [My husband] completed only four grades, that's all there was in the countryside. [They were poor, my husband told me] how he walked on foot from the village to the city, he had a pair of shoes his father had bought him, so he carried them on his back and only upon reaching the outskirts did he wash his legs, put on the foot wraps, put on the shoes, and went to the city. And the same thing on his way back. He didn't want to wear the shoes his father had been promising him for several years and finally bought him.

We fled, some people went to the station, to the trains, while we went on foot, and many people walked with us, back from Silesia, I guess, some teachers, we walked along the Vistula bank, and there was a house, and besides the house lay our Polish soldiers who had been mobilized to fight but had received no order and didn't know where to go, what to do, and they lay in a row because they were exhausted [8](#).

And so, walking along the Vistula, we reached Rzeszow, and in Rzeszow I moved in with my mother. And on our way, a barber went with us, a Ukrainian, and he tells [the men], 'I know the way, let's keep going.' [And my husband went with them]. On the way one of those boys decided to make a detour to Mielec, I think it was [a town, 60 km north-west of Rzeszow], he told them, 'You go, I'll catch up with you, I'll only drop by, I have relatives there.' And when he caught up with them later, he told them his neighbors had chased him away. [They told him] 'Look where your people are.' There was a hole dug out by the road, covered with lime, blood was soaking through, the earth was moving, and he ran away. And they went as far as Lwow. And from Lwow [my husband] sent me a letter to come as soon as possible with his brother and his brother's fiancée, and we set off all three, but this time we hired a horse wagon to get us to the Bug.

And I remember that we happened upon some German troops marching down the road, and [my husband's] brother was scared and hid in some house. We were also scared that they would take our horses away, but they didn't, just marched past us, so he went out of that house and we kept riding up to the place where we wanted to cross to the other side, it was the river Bug, but how to cross it? We had some money on us; especially my husband's brother had some. We went into a house, a Ukrainian man lived there; he must have spoken German because otherwise we wouldn't have been able to communicate. There was a manor there, and in the manor stood the NKVD [9](#), and there were German troops. The others were afraid to get in. It must have been my young age that I was bolder than then others, I went in and first of all I told the Ukrainian that we would pay him if he got us through. I went to the NKVD, a tall, handsome German came out, with that bird on his hat, and says to us, 'here, on this side, are the Germans, there, opposite, are the Russians, with all the equipment, if the Germans see you, they'll start shooting.' [After 28th September 1939, the territories immediately west of the Bug River found themselves under joint German-Soviet occupation. Soviet troops later left the area as a result of the so called second Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, in return for transferring Lithuania to the Soviet sphere of interest.]

The German and the Ukrainian went with us to the river bank, to a ford, we paid the Ukrainian 15 zlotys, and when we were crossing the river, I lost my fountain pen and the rest of the money that I had hidden. We waded in, and there were slippery stones. Water up to here, and I cannot swim to this day. Whether the others could, I don't know, but we pushed ahead. All wet I eventually reached the other side, we climbed up that high bank on all fours, like apes, we stood there, and no one comes to us, no one asks us anything, nothing, so well, if there's no one, then off we go.

We went to a peasant; he gave us a place to sleep. They told us to get inside, they were Jews, and it was Friday night or Saturday, some kind of a holiday, they fed us, gave us a bed, we took a rest, but we wanted to get at least to Przemyśl [a town 90 km east of Rzeszów], we knew there were friends there, because people had already been fleeing the German-occupied territories, so they told us where the town council was, to go there.

I went there, the place was swarming with young people, and I presented the facts, how things were, in fact, my looks told everything! Half-withered, and they ask, 'what name can you give us to prove that you are indeed with the communist youth.' I remembered there was a liaison named Karol, so I say 'Karol,' 'Well, he's here with us!' and that saved me, saved us all, they gave us a bus to go to Przemyśl, and from there, by a train, to Lwów. It was late autumn 1939. We spent about a year in Lwów.

My mother and grandmother stayed in Rzeszów. Grandma was an old lady, how to take her on such a voyage? And my mother stayed, because otherwise she would have surely gone with us. In fact, did we know at all where we were going?! In Lwów I was joined by my brother [Mojżesz]. [He came from Bielsko Biala] because when the war broke out, the Germans announced that all young Jews, aged so and so, should report and told them to pack because they would go east to work there. And he packed everything he had into a suitcase and went east, in a normal car, not a freight one. In the meantime they were being beaten badly, he lost three teeth, and it was not the Germans who were beating them but Poles, civilians. I imagine they were young people, and they probably made a fuss because they didn't know where they were going.

After they passed the border, they saw people working in the fields, in a forest; they guessed they were going to work. The train stopped, they got off, the Germans told them to pay 4 zlotys per piece of luggage, and peasants waited with wagons to take those suitcases. Then they lined them up in a row and the Germans started shooting, and when they started shooting, [my brother] ran away. And suddenly he found himself in one shoe on the Russian side, with nothing on himself, naked. Peasants allowed him to go into a stable, lie down. 'After I woke up,' he told me, 'I got a second shoe, an odd one, and something to put on myself, some white shawl.' He knew I was in Lwów; he wanted to get to Lwów. Only I don't remember how he eventually found me.

[In Lwów] we lived in a former prison, the party found us a job and the place to stay. Me and two other friends got a job at the Aida factory: tubes, filters, and paper [a cigarette factory]. Every week we received an allowance of tubes, the kind of empty cigarettes, and there was a machine for stuffing them with tobacco. I didn't need those tubes because we didn't smoke, but I gave it to my brother who sold the stuff on the market. In fact, he had no job, so that was a kind of support. And the man he had worked for in Bielsko found himself in Lwów too and paid [my brother] five zlotys a week as a means of support, for nothing. He obviously had money.

Then we rented a room. The landlord [gave us] a single spring bed, but there was no mattress so we slept on the bare springs. The landlord lived in the same house, in a different part of it, and he knew we slept like that. He is surely dead by now, but if he's alive, perhaps it pricks his conscience that he was so mean to us. Then my husband got sick, he had stomach ulcers, and people at my work helped secure a place for him in a sanatorium on Kurkowa Street, in Lwow, and he spent like two weeks there, but he was still sick, an ulcer doesn't go away easily.

When he got back home, two uniformed men came and told us to pack our things. And what did we have? Nothing! A moment and we left, they took us to a freight car, didn't tell us why. Did they know themselves? They didn't - they had their orders, and that's it. And so they took us to Kazakhstan, to Semipalatynsk [city in eastern Kazakhstan, 80 km from today's border with Russia], we had no money, no clothes, we were hungry, like dogs, or worse. My husband had 100 rubles in his trouser pocket.

We had a friend in Semipalatynsk, a man we knew from Rzeszow, a communist too. His name was Motek, and we needed to find a place to stay, an apartment. He found one for us, we had to pay 20 rubles, and [my husband] must have obviously been robbed of the hundred. We were left penniless. [My husband] went to the other Poles to ask for a job, for something to do. They reacted in an ugly way, laughed at him, because they earned their living there by stealing. But he met three Czech guys somewhere who worked with horses, and they told him to come, that they would give him oats, and he came and had his pockets full of oats and we ate it.

The three Czechs who gave him the oats also fixed him a small job with a Kazakh man. They said [the Kazakh] would give him flour. [My husband] went to the man with some crewel and fixed his 'shuba.' A 'shuba' was a kind of sheepskin, [my husband] sat there, there was no proper table, only a low round one, you don't sit on it; it's for eating in a squatting position. Those Kazakhs had all gone to work and there came the Kazakh's old wife, she was obviously preparing a dinner, and she had a knife, and the ram, smoked or raw, hung there, and she [was cutting it]. And [my husband] was afraid of the knife. And he ate his fill there. [The Kazakh] gave him a whole lot of flour, and I made my first potato dumplings then.

Of all of us, it was the hardest for our daughter Frania, who was born there in August [1941]. Shortly before that we got married; we went to an office to sign a document, there was no ceremony of any sort. We had to register officially, arrange the formalities. Frania went through nine pneumonias in a row. The Russians told me there was an establishment where I'd get food for her, and indeed, I regularly got a half-liter pot of some nourishment mixture, she was an infant, she couldn't eat properly, so it was liquid, not pure milk but a pulp of some sort. And I had to leave her [with a babysitter] because we had no place of our own yet, and of all of us from that train had been billeted all together, and then I had to go to work, because that was the only way. In fact, we were young, you had to work; we had no means of support whatsoever.

And it was like that, when I worked, I received 600 grams of bread a day, and my daughter, my baby, whether it actually ate the bread or not, received 300 grams. And I gave that 300 grams to [the babysitter] in return for changing her clothes, feeding her the food I was receiving for [my daughter], and so on. Whether she fed her or not, I don't know, but when I came, the [baby] would lay all buttoned up, red in the face, scorched, [the babysitter] didn't change her, the baby just lay there, I can imagine how she cried, because it burns. [Then] I arranged for her to be admitted to a



day care center and the Russian woman there told me, 'For the burned skin, use "fasting butter",' this is oil. I applied the oil for the whole night, and it helped. How I managed to secure the oil, I don't remember.

[Then I worked] in a tailor's shop and everyday I carried the baby to the day care center. I'd wrap her in a cotton blanket using my husband's belt, and when she heard me enter, heard me open the door, she'd start squealing – a little baby! She was just several months old. When I came to pick her up, it was winter time, they had no heating there, her hands were red, swollen, her legs chilblained, completely swollen, they sat at a round table, there were chairs to match, and how I brought her, so she lay there, in the same clothes, unchanged, nothing!

Then I started taking her with me to work, it was nearby, I'd put her on a table, unwrap, those hands were so swollen, cold, and you had to back home on foot, and there was heavy snow there, the snow banks were taller than a man's height, you could only go where a path had been worn. Today I know it was a nice winter because there was no wind, if there was any, the snow banks stopped it. I had shoes back from Lwow, leather soles and canvas uppers, the three-fourths, laced-up kind of ones; they were all wet by the time I got back home. And at home there was no bed, no heating, nothing, no stove, we slept on the floor and covered ourselves with what we had brought with us. That's how it was.

Meanwhile, my husband had been enlisted for the 'trudarmya' [10](#), the work battalions, to work with the horses. They slept on bunk beds, and there were lice all over the place. He got stomach ulcers there, and instead of feeding him the proper food, they simply fed him with what they had. In any case, my husband had a very strong will, none of my children were as strong-willed as he was, and he decided he'd go to town, to an official there in charge of labor. And he went there, on foot, and told the man about the conditions he worked in, about what they fed him, and showed him the medical certificate. The official picked up the phone and called the place where [my husband] worked. 'If you can't feed the man properly, then better send him home!' he told them. And they released him. One day I look out of the window, and I see him marching with a bundle on his back. That way he got back. It could have been 1942, 1943.

Then my husband was hospitalized, and after he had been released, they enlisted him again, didn't leave him in peace. Why did they enlist him? Because they were giving everyone Russian passports [11](#) and my husband didn't want one, he insisted he wasn't a Russian and wanted to live in Poland once the war ended. And those people that refused to become Russian nationals they often jailed, and him they enlisted [again], to work in a tailor's shop, a military one. I cannot recall the name of the place. And it was good there for him, the manager told him there were unhappy people everywhere, because it was war, but in that place they were patriots. The young people would give their lives for Stalin, and for a 'stakan' – a stakan is a glass of vodka – and for something else, he mentioned three things, I don't remember.

[Even in Lwow] my brother wanted to go back to Rzeszow. But he had no choice, had no work, and couldn't go with us because they didn't take him. They deported very many people, I don't know what those people thought, generally people were afraid, and he fled somewhere to Bessarabia and wrote us a letter he had been enlisted [I don't know to which army], and that we'd never see each other again, that was the last we heard from him. Perhaps he felt [he'd never return], that's how it is when you're going to the front. And that was it, we never heard from him again.

During the war me and my mother wrote each other, she begged me for some coffee, she obviously thought we had access to it here, so I sent her some, but it was chicory coffee, the ordinary one, and it was still very hard to get. I don't know whether my mother was in the ghetto, or whatever happened to her, I only know what they told me after the war, that it could have august when they took them away, and my grandmother was shot on the street by the Germans, because she couldn't walk. My mother wrote me that. That was 1943 or 1942 [Editor's note: it was 1942]. My mother was later taken away, but I know nothing.

The war ended, and the Poles organized the repatriation, Wasilewska [12](#) arranged for those people to go back to Poland. And we went back. We were members of the Union of Polish Patriots [13](#). We arrived in Poland on 1st June 1946. We rode for two months on that train. We stayed in Szczecin!

My husband wanted to visit the place where he came from, and in 1946 he went to Rzeszow, we had a friend there, one Tomek Wisniewski, a communist from before the war, my [husband's] friend from the same village. [My husband] went to him, and he tells him, 'If you go there by yourself, you won't come back! I'll go with you.' The realities were such that if a Jew had come back, he obviously had something to come back for, some property, and he'd get killed [14](#). And that guy [Wisniewski] went with him. My husband wanted to see the place, he was born there, went to school there, had his friends there. And he told me he couldn't even recognize the place, he said, 'The beaten tracks, the houses, here's the house, with a thatched roof, and opposite a brick one.' [No one survived of my husband's family, only the adopted brother], Alman Intrater. My husband secured an official paper from a court, somewhere near Przemysl, confirming all those people were dead.

[Alman Intrater] went through all the camps here in Poland, and he was saved from a camp by some German nuns, he was already very weak, someone they called a 'moslem' [in the camp terminology, a 'moslem' was a prisoner on the verge of death, already so starved that he had virtually lost his will to survive], he could no longer eat anything, whatever he ate, passed through him in no time, so that was a pre-terminal stage, and then the war ended, and they took him to Sweden. They took him there because a Gestapo man had destroyed his eye with a whip, and they wanted to save his other eye, took him to a hospital, it didn't work, he went blind. He told me later he would have died too because very many of those taken to Sweden pitched into food and died. You weren't supposed to eat, and him they administered some medicinal charcoal in that hospital and he survived on that.

He had to be a very strong man, he was some kind of a military man in Poland before the war, but what kind, I don't know. My husband visited him after the war, and saw him, but the other man couldn't see him [because he was blind]. He married a Polish woman, lived with her in Sweden. And it turns out he died of a stroke, I don't remember when. He survived everything else, but that - he didn't.

My husband had a job with the WPHO, a shoe-distribution enterprise that exists to this day. And I didn't work. I had two children! In 1948 I gave birth to a son named Leon. He completed a musical school and is a pianist, and my daughter completed a business college.

[My children] went to the Public School no. 5, the communists' children all went there. There was a period when religion started to be taught at schools [until 1961, religion classes were held at public schools], it was under Gomulka [15](#), I guess, and all the kids enrolled, communist or no communist,

but [Leon] didn't. The priest came, told him to stay, said God would bless him if he did, stroked his head, and [Leon] says there is no God at all. The priest got angry, grabbed him, opened the door and hurled him so the poor Leon landed under the opposite corridor wall, all bruised. But that wasn't all, because after classes, in front of the school, the kids attacked Leon and started beating him. There's a police station opposite and one of the policemen came up and he couldn't tear the boy off because he sat on my son's face and didn't want to let go. When Leon came home, I called my neighbor, a doctor, and she told me to put him into bed and give him nothing to eat except cottage cheese. He got jaundice then.

My children knew from the very beginning [about their Jewish roots]. My son left Poland during the martial law [16](#) and went to America because he couldn't get a job [here] because he was a Jew. And today he understands a lot because he lived among Jews in America. And they wanted to give him a job, only the rabbi told him to get circumcised. And he didn't want to. Today he lives in Kiel [Germany] and remains a man at the crossroads, while my daughter wants to have nothing to do with all that; she's married to a Pole.

My son didn't want to get married, he had an ambition to have a high living standard, and today he's old. My daughter has a daughter, Ania. She divorced her first husband and has married again. Ania's father was called I., a Pole. I don't know who he was or where he works - it's been some years. Ania is 37. She worked as an English teacher in school, earned poorly, and eventually she made some arrangements and went to Sweden to work. She's already been a year there, we'll see! She had a husband, his name was K., but they got divorced, she has no children and cannot have any.

Me and my husband were party members uninterruptedly: before the war, during it, and afterwards. We were moved by 1968 [17](#) like everyone else. Only we viewed it from a different angle: for us, those were mistakes committed by our own [the communists]. One generation has to sacrifice its life, its health, for things to change. We couldn't leave [Poland] because by husband was seriously ill, he had already gone through one surgery, of the stomach, then of the gall bladder, there's no hospital in Szczecin that he wouldn't have been to, I had no one to go with. Me without a profession, the children, him being sick... That would have been like signing our own death sentence, as they say.

I am a member of the club [TSKZ] [18](#), but no activist, I just pay my fees. I couldn't do anything even if I wanted to. In the past, I helped. Me and my husband had been in the club since the very beginning. There was a time when everyone had gone away and it looked like the club might be closed down. My husband had a talent, the talent of a social activist, and he organized everything, found a president and a caretaker. He died in 1993, but everybody still remembers him. We had never been to Israel, had no money. We have never been abroad, in fact.

I'm old today, 88, have trouble walking. But I want to live, don't want to pass away yet. What else can I tell you? Everyone, if they have lived to the age of 88, have stories to tell, but is it important? It's just life!

Glossary

## [1](#) Rzeszow Ghetto

It was created in January 1942 and contained a total of approx. 25,000 Jews from Rzeszow and the surrounding area. In the summer of 1942 over 20,000 people were murdered in the extermination camp in Belzec, several thousand were shot to death in the forests near Rudna, Szebnie and Glogow. The ghetto was finally liquidated in September 1943. Persons suitable for labor were deported to labor camps in Szebnie and Plaszow; the remaining ones were killed in Auschwitz. A few Jews remained in the Rzeszow labor camp until July 1944.

## **2 Rzeszow synagogues**

two synagogues exist in Rzeszów to this day. The 'Small' or 'Old Town' synagogue, located at 4 Boznicza Street, was built in 1610. It was expanded significantly following a fire in 1842. Built on the plane of a square, with a round donjon in the north-western corner. It was burned down by the Germans in 1944. It was rebuilt in 1953-1963 to house the state archives office. The building is owned today by the Jewish Community of Cracow which rents office space to the State Archive in Rzeszow. The synagogue also houses the Center for Jewish History Research, involved in locating archival Judaica. The second synagogue, called the 'Large' or 'New Town' one, located at 18 Sobieskiego Street, was built in 1686. It was burned down during the war, rebuilt in 1963. It presently houses the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions.

## **3 Emigration of German Jews**

according to rough estimates, some 278,000 Jews emigrated from Nazi Germany in the period 1933-1944. Most of them left Germany after the pogrom in 1938, the so-called Crystal Night. Nazi authorities supported and facilitated emigration. Moreover, they forced those leaving the country to sign declarations that they would not return to Germany, threatening to send them to concentration camps. Emigration was organized by Jewish organizations, for example Reichsverwertung and Hauptstelle fuer juedische Auswanderung. In January 1939 the Reich Headquarters for Jewish Emigration was created in the ministry of internal affairs and directed by Reinhardt Heydrich. Legal emigration was curtailed with an ordinance issued on 23rd October 1941. Jewish refugees from Germany were admitted by: France, Belgium, Holland, Great Britain, Poland, Switzerland, Italy, Luxembourg. In the fall of 1933, the office of the High Commissioner for refugees from Germany, which was to coordinate the admission of exiles to various countries, was created at the League of Nations. In the first period, Palestine admitted relatively few refugees. After the Anschluss of Austria, a project of systematic large-scale emigration of Jews to Palestine via Greece was created by Wilhelm Perl. The project was realized by Adolf Eichmann. 50,000 people left Germany that way. Waves of Jewish exiles reached South American countries as well as Africa, Australia and even Shanghai.

## **4 Pilsudski, Józef (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.

## **5 Bereza Kartuska**

town in eastern Poland (presently Belarus). Polish authorities have established an internment camp there in 1934. By the decree of the President of the Polish Republic in reference to persons who constitute a threat to public safety and peace, suspects could be held there without trial, only by administrative order, for a period of three months, which could then be extended by another three months. The first prisoners were members of the nationalist Polish organization Oboz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR, suspected of having organized the assassination of the minister of internal affairs, Bronislaw Pieracki. The prisoners of Bereza were mostly members of radical political organizations: communists, Ukrainian nationalists, ONR members. The conditions in Bereza were very harsh, the prisoners were tortured.

## **6 Communist Party of Poland (KPP)**

created in December 1918 in Warsaw, its aim was to create a global or pan-European federal socialist state, and it fought against the rebirth of the Polish state. Between 1921 and 1923 it propagated slogans advocating a two-stage revolution (the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the socialist revolution), the reinforcement of Poland's sovereignty, the right to self-determination of the ethnic minorities living within the II Republic of Poland, and worker and peasant government of the country. After 1924, as in the rest of the international communist movement, ultra-revolutionary tendencies developed. From 1929 the KPP held the stance that the conditions were right for the creation by revolution of a Polish Republic of Soviets with a system based on the Soviet model, and advocated 'social fascism' and 'peasant fascism'. In 1935 on the initiative of Stalin, the KPP wrought further changes in its program (recognizing the existence of the II Polish Republic and its political system). In 1919 the KPP numbered some 7,000-8,000 members, and in 1934 around 10,000 (37 percent peasants), with a majority of Jews, Belarus and Ukrainians. In 1937 Stalin took the decision to liquidate the KPP; the majority of its leaders were arrested and executed in the USSR, and in 1939 the party was finally liquidated on the charge that it had been taken over by provocateurs and spies.

## **7 Bund**

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

## **8 September Campaign 1939**

armed struggle in defense of Poland's independence from 1st September to 6th October 1939 against German and, from 17th September, also Soviet aggression; the start of World War II. The German plan of aggression ('Fall Weiss') assumed all-out, lightning warfare (Blitzkrieg). The Polish plan of defense planned engagement of battle in the border region (a length of some 1,600 km), and then organization of resistance further inside the country along subsequent lines of defense (chiefly along the Narew, Vistula and San) until an allied (French and British) offensive on the western front. Poland's armed forces, commanded by the Supreme Commander, Marshal Edward Rydz-Smigly, numbered some 1 m soldiers. Poland defended itself in isolation; on 3rd September Britain and France declared war on Germany, yet did not undertake offensive action on a larger scale. Following a battle on the border the main Polish line of defense was broken, and the Polish forces retreated in battles on the Vistula and the San. On 8th September, the German army reached Warsaw, and on 12th September Lvov. From 14-16 September the Germans closed their ring on the Bug. On 9th September Polish divisions commanded by General Tadeusz Kutrzeba went into battle with the Germans on the Bzura, but after initial successes were surrounded and largely smashed (by 22 September), although some of the troops managed to get to Warsaw. Defense was continued by isolated centers of resistance, where the civilian population cooperated with the army in defense. On 17th September Soviet forces numbering more than 800,000 men crossed Poland's eastern border, broke through the defense of the Polish forces and advanced nearly as far as the Narew-Bug-Vistula-San line. In the night of 17-18 September the president of Poland, the government and the Supreme Commander crossed the Polish-Romanian border and were interned. Lvov capitulated on 22nd September (surrendered to Soviet units), Warsaw on 28th September, Modlin on 29th September, and Hel on 2nd October.

## **9 NKVD**

(Russ.: Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del), People's Committee of Internal Affairs, the supreme security authority in the USSR – the secret police. Founded by Lenin in 1917, it nevertheless played an insignificant role until 1934, when it took over the GPU (the State Political Administration), the political police. The NKVD had its own police and military formations, and also possessed the powers to pass sentence on political matters, and as such in practice had total control over society. Under Stalin's rule the NKVD was the key instrument used to terrorize the civilian population. The NKVD ran a network of labor camps for millions of prisoners, the Gulag. The heads of the NKVD were as follows: Genrikh Yagoda (to 1936), Nikolai Yezhov (to 1938) and Lavrenti Beria. During the war against Germany the political police, the KGB, was spun off from the NKVD. After the war it also operated on USSR-occupied territories, including in Poland, where it assisted the nascent communist authorities in suppressing opposition. In 1946 the NKVD was renamed the Ministry of the Interior.

## **10 Trudarmya (labor army)**

created in the USSR during WWII. In September 1941 the commissioner of military affairs of Kazakhstan, Gen. A. Shcherbakov, acting upon an order issued by central authorities, ordered the conscription into the so-called labor army (trudarmya) of Polish citizens, mostly of Ukrainian, Belarus and Jewish nationality. The core of the mobilized laborers consisted of men between 15 and

60 years of age and childless women. The laborers of *trudarmya* mostly returned to Poland as part of the repatriation scheme in 1946. The last wave of repatriates, mostly Jews, came back from the USSR between 1955 and 1957.

### **11 Passportization**

in the spring 1940, in Soviet-occupied Polish territories, the Soviet authorities started the so called passportization, issuing Soviet passports to the former Polish citizens. Refugees from western Poland were issued 'paragraph 11' passports, and people with a 'wrong' family background, 'paragraph 13' passports. Both groups were forbidden from living in large cities and in a 100 kilometer-wide zone along the Soviet Union's new western border. For that reason, and also to demonstrate their loyalty to Poland, some Polish citizens refused to accept the Soviet document. Such refusal resulted in arrest and imprisonment in a labor camp or exile in the Siberia and other remote parts of the Soviet Union.

### **12 Wasilewska, Wanda (1905-64)**

From 1934-37 she was a member of the Supreme Council of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). In 1940 she became a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. From 1941-43 she was a political commissary in the Red Army and editor of 'Nowe Widnokregi'. In 1943 she helped to organize the Union of Polish Patriots and the Polish armed forces in the USSR. In 1944 she became a member of the Central Bureau of Polish Communists in the USSR and vice-chairperson of the Polish Committee for National Liberation. After the war she remained in the USSR. Author of the social propaganda novels 'Oblicze Dnia' (The Face of the Day, 1934), 'Ojczyzna' (Fatherland, 1935) and 'Ziemia w Jarzmie' (Land under the Yoke, 1938), and the war novel 'Teczka' (Rainbow, 1944).

### **13 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 (April 1943). The upper ranks of the ZPP were dominated by communists (from January 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.

### **14 Postwar pogroms**

There are various explanations for the hostile attitude of the Poles towards the Jews who survived.

Factors include propaganda before the war and during the occupation, wartime moral decay and crime, fear of punishment for crimes committed against Jews during the war, conviction that the imposed communist authorities were dominated by Jews, and the issue of ownership of property left by murdered Jews (appropriated by Poles, and returning owners or their heirs wanted to reclaim it). These were often the reasons behind expulsions of Jews returning to their hometowns, attacks, and even localized pogroms. In scores of places there were anti-Jewish demonstrations. The biggest were the pogrom in Cracow in August 1945 and the pogrom in Kielce in July 1946. Some instances of violence against Jews were part of the strategies of armed underground anti-communist groups. The 'train campaign,' which involved pulling Jews returning from the USSR off trains and shooting them, claimed 200 victims. Detachments of the National Armed Forces, an extreme right-wing underground organization, are believed to have been behind this. Antipathy towards repatriates was rooted in the conviction that Jews returning from Russia were being brought back to reinforce the party apparatus. Over 1,000 Jews are estimated to have been killed in postwar Poland.

### **15 Gomulka Wladyslaw (1905-1982)**

communist activist and politician, one of the leading figures of the political scene of the Polish People's Republic, secretary general of the Central Committee (KC). In 1948 he was accused with so-called rightist-nationalist tendencies. As a consequence, he was imprisoned in 1951 and removed from the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). He was released in 1954 as a national hero, patriot and 'Polish' communist. From 21 October 1956 First Secretary of the Central Committee and member of the PZPR Central Committee's Political Office, from 1957 member of the State Council and deputy to the Polish Sejm. Initially enjoyed the support of public opinion (resisted Soviet pressure) and pursued a policy of moderate reforms of the political and economic system. In 1968 he came out in favor of intervention by the states of the Warsaw Bloc in Czechoslovakia. He was responsible for anti-Semitic repressions in March 1968 (as a result of which over 20,000 were forced to leave Poland) and the used of force against participants in the workers' revolt of December 1970. On 20th December 1970 he was forced to resign his post as First Secretary of the Central Committee and member of the PZPR Central Committee's Political Office, in 1970 he was dismissed from his other posts, and in 1971 he was forced into retirement.

### **16 Martial law in Poland in 1981**

extraordinary legal measures introduced by a State Council decree on 13th December 1981 in an attempt to defend the communist system and destroy the democratic opposition. The martial law decree suspended the activity of associations and trades unions, including Solidarity, introduced a curfew, imposed travel restrictions, gave the authorities the right to arrest opposition activists, search private premises, and conduct body searches, banned public gatherings. A special, non-constitutional state authority body was established, the Military Board of National Salvation (WRON), which oversaw the implementation of the martial law regulations, headed by general Wojciech Jaruzelski, the armed forces supreme commander. Over 5,900 persons were arrested during the martial law, chiefly Solidarity activists. Local Solidarity branches organized protest strikes. The Wujek coal mine, occupied by striking miners, was stormed by police assault squads, leading to the death of nine miners. The martial law regulations were gradually being eased, by December 1982, for instance, all interned opposition activists were released. On 31st December 1982, the martial law was suspended, and on 21st July 1983, it was revoked.



## **17 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.

## **18 TSKZ (Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews)**

founded in 1950 when the Central Committee of Polish Jews merged with the Jewish Society of Culture. From 1950-1991 it was the sole body representing Jews in Poland. Its statutory aim was to develop, preserve and propagate Jewish culture. During the socialist period this aim was subordinated to communist ideology. Post-1989 most young activists gravitated towards other Jewish organizations. However, the SCSPJ continues to organize a range of cultural events and has its own magazine, The Jewish Word. However, it is primarily an organization of older people, who have been involved with it for years.