

Noemi Korsan-Ekert

Noemi Korsan-Ekert

Warsaw

Poland

Interviewer: Zuzanna Solakiewicz

Date of interview: October 2004 – May 2005

Noemi Korsan-Ekert is a retired actress and theater director. She was raised in Boryslaw, the heart of the Galician oil-mining region, in a Zionist family. After the war she moved from city to city to finally settle with her family in Warsaw. Since her husband's death, six years ago, she has lived alone. Mrs. Ekert is an affable woman, with cheerful eyes and a head of silver curls. We met in her apartment. She served strong tea and delicious cottage-cheese cookies or chocolate-glazed plums. When she spoke her hands followed her thoughts as if she was waving to someone from afar. None of her family photographs survived the war. If not for a cousin in America, she would have no pre-war photographs of her relatives.

My grandfather on my mother's side, Aaron Gelb, was a rabbinical scholar. He was highly esteemed in his town of Kolbuszowa [South-East Poland]. His name was well-known and he was known as a wise man, an erudite.

I was around five when my mother first took me to visit our family in Kolbuszowa. It was 1926. What I saw was a whole new world to me. My parents were the first lay generation in the family. I was sent to my grandfather to learn about the tradition, to experience religious holidays. We arrived on a Thursday. It had to be Thursday, because my mother had to leave on her trip back before Friday, not to offend grandfather's religious feelings.

On our way to Kolbuszowa, we stopped in Rzeszow, at my mother's older sister, Chana's place. Then we got on a train, arrived at a tiny train station and took a carriage to my grandfather's house. My mother left the next morning. Pesach was coming up and my visit was to last through the holidays. All that I saw was extraordinary.

The town itself, Kolbuszowa, I remember only vaguely. There were flower gardens and blooming trees – it must have been April. I remember the town square. My grandfather's house wasn't tall but spread wide. There were three rooms and a very large kitchen. To the left of the kitchen there was the room I never entered where lessons were held – those Talmudic disputes – as my grandfather had pupils, a dozen or so. And there were two rooms to the right. One was the ceremonial room where the holiday meals were celebrated; otherwise meals were taken in the kitchen.

There were books everywhere. Even in the kitchen there was a small shelf for small books. In the ceremonial room a whole wall was packed with books, big and small, thick and thin. Those were the holy books with biblical commentary, Talmudic. Sometimes Grandfather would take one of those to his students. He spent every free moment bent over a book. Next to the bookshelves there was a small table with curved legs and a wide top over which an oil lamp hung low. That was where my grandfather read. That table belonged only to him.

My grandfather's students were teenage boys. I don't know whether they were all from Kolbuszowa or rented a room somewhere. I didn't have the wits to find out. They studied every day and ate at my grandfather's during the holidays. For example, during Pesach, they would stay for meals throughout the eight days.

My grandfather was widowed at an early age; I was around two when my grandmother died, some time at the beginning of the 1920s. After her death the youngest daughter took over household duties. Her name was Gienia; Goldzia in Yiddish. My grandfather had seven children: Simcha, Mosze, Chana, Ida, Estera, my mother Salomea Sara, and Goldzia. He took care to give education to all of his children, not only the boys, but also the girls. All of his daughters attended schools.

My grandfather had great hopes for Simcha, his eldest, born in 1888 or 1887. He sent Simcha to Vienna to become a rabbi. Simcha studied Judaism at the Philosophy Department of Vienna University. He was hungry for knowledge, fascinated by German literature, particularly poetry. As a third-year student Simcha came across the Zionist movement and became an active participant. He became an editor for the *Neue Freie Presse* [an influential Viennese liberal daily newspaper]. My grandfather was greatly disappointed that his talented and smart son, an object of his great expectations, who was to become a scholar and a rabbi, ended up as an entirely lay man.

When he graduated from university, Simcha went on to establish Tarbut schools [1](#) in East Galicia. As far as I remember, Uncle Simcha emigrated to America in 1926. He had a PhD and was invited by the University of Minnesota as a visiting scholar. Then he got tenure. He went alone at first, but then he brought his family, too: his wife, Sulamit, and his three sons, Saadia, Amiel and Hagaj. Their daughter was born already in the States. They named her Awiwa. I remember Aunt Sulamit; she had such gentle features. She must have been very happy when Awiwa was born for she always dreamed about a daughter.

When it comes to Uncle Mosze, my grandfather's second son, I only remember that he stayed in Kolbuszowa and got married very late. I mean late for the existing standards; he was around 40 then: 38 or maybe 37 years old.

Three of my grandfather's five daughters also remained in Kolbuszowa. Those were my aunts Ida, Estera and Goldzia. Aunt Chana settled with her family in Rzeszow. They all lived according to the tradition. The oldest of the sisters, Ida, wore a wig. She had her hair underneath cut short. I only discovered this custom of wearing short hair under the wig years later, somewhere else. When I was small, I wasn't interested in such things. But my mother told me that Aunt Ida had a wig. It seems Aunt Estera didn't.

Ida's, Estera's and Chana's husbands were also attached to the tradition, but they were not zealously religious. For example, they wore beards, but those were trimmed, modeled beards, while very religious men's beards were never trimmed. But still, they wore beards and they wore hats. On Friday evenings and other holidays when they went to the temple, they wore shiny frock-coats. Frock coats were long jackets. The richer one was, the more beautiful were the fabric-covered buttons, the more elegantly cut and the more exquisite the frock-coat.

The children in those families received Jewish upbringing: a Saturday was a Saturday, the temple was the temple, everything was done according to the rules. Everything was kosher. Those were bilingual households: Yiddish and Polish was spoken.

My mother, Salomea Sara, was born in 1900, in Kolbuszowa. She was very gifted. She had very close relations with her siblings, she cared about them and loved them, but she was closest to Simcha, her eldest brother whom she held in great esteem. She loved him very much. It was Simcha that inspired her with a passion for German literature and who brought home German books from Vienna.

My mother went to the local public school in Kolbuszowa. That was still under the partitions [2](#), but Polish was the language of instruction. Then she decided to go to Cracow, against her parents' will. She was 13. She wanted to attend secondary school there. I can't remember exactly what kind of school that was, most likely private, definitely for women only, with classes taught in Polish.

My mother had a cousin in Cracow, with whom she was good friends. He helped her arrange things. His father, my mother's uncle, had a soda water stand in Cracow. He agreed to support my mother and pay for her school in exchange for help – my mother worked for him serving soda water to the clients. I can't remember either the name of the cousin, or the uncle, I only remember their last name was Gewirc and the name of the cousin's son, born many years later, was Zruba'el.

After my mother went to Cracow, my grandfather cut her off completely and their relations were rather chilly until years later, when my mother sent me to him for the holidays. That was a very smart move on her part, for Grandfather warmed up to her then and later even paid us a visit.

In the Cracow school my mother found out about the Polish patriotic movement, Polish culture and socialism and became quite committed to the latter. She passed her matriculation exam majoring in the Classics. She knew Greek and Latin and loved Polish literature. She would frequently recite poetry – 'Beniowski,' or 'Pan Tadeusz' – she knew those long poems by heart and gave beautiful renderings of them. [Editor's note: works by famous Polish Romantic poets: 'Beniowski' was written by Juliusz Slowacki (1809-1849) and 'Pan Tadeusz' by Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855).]

After graduation my mother went to Lwow where Simcha lived at the time. It was under his influence that she became interested in Zionism. But there was still a lot of the socialist in her; for example, she was an ardent atheist. Oh, she always expressed radical views. Simcha was lay, practical, very educated, but my mother was much more expressive, more dynamic than he was.

As a Zionist, my mother started teaching in the Tarbut school which he ran in Lwow. Markus Presser – a Zionist with a passion for German literature and linguistics – also taught at the school. Soon they were married. That was in 1920. I was born on 31st December 1921. I had no siblings.

My father, Markus Presser, was born in the small town of Gwozdziec, near Kolomyja, in 1894. He was an orphan and a self-educated man. His mother died giving birth to him, his father died when he was about two or three. He was taken care of by his teenage sister, Chana, and his brother, Abraham. Chana died at twenty-something.

Dad was left with the older brother, who became a surrogate father to him. Abraham got married and had his own children. Apparently he was an excellent tailor, but he wasn't well-off. He wanted to secure an education for my father but couldn't systematically pay for school.

So Dad studied on his own and each year took official extramural exams in the public school in Stanislawow. In his childhood my father had three friends: one of them later became a doctor; his name was, if I remember correctly, Schwartz; one later owned a restaurant; the third was the

father of Konstanty Puzyna [well-known theater critic (1929-1989)]. The latter had a wonderful library and my father borrowed lots of books from him.

In the part of Poland under Austrian partitions elementary public school went up to the 10th grade, but after the 4th grade, at ten, one could move to a secondary school. My father managed to get into a secondary school after passing his 5th grade extramural exams. That was in 1907.

After the exam, the head of the examination committee, Doctor Einer, offered to enroll my father in a secondary school in Stanislawow, where he was the principal. He also offered my father a place to stay: doctor Einer's wife ran a lodging-house for students and my father was to get a room in exchange for tutoring her lodgers. There were three or four boys, not particularly bright, who needed help with their school-work. Of course my father agreed immediately. That was a private Austrian school, where the language of instruction was German.

My father's passion was linguistics, his specialty comparative grammar. He knew Arabic. He learned the language all on his own, but I can't remember where he got the textbooks and whether someone gave him that idea or it was all his own. Probably it was his own, because he tended to take charge of his own studies.

He found out about Zionism when he was in the army. After he did his service he started teaching at the Tarbut school in Lwow where, in addition to the general subjects, Jewish history and culture were taught. My father taught Hebrew. That was the school established by Simcha, my mother's older brother. That's where my parents met.

As I said before, I was a five-year-old girl when I came to my grandfather to spend Pesach at his house. A child from a progressive Zionist family at a religious Ashkenazi household... The first obstacle was the language: the entire household spoke Yiddish as their everyday language and I couldn't understand a word! At home I always spoke Hebrew. Some of the members of the household I could communicate with in Polish.

They did try to speak Hebrew to me, but it didn't help much. They used an Ashkenazi pronunciation, since they knew that language only as the language of prayer and the Holy Scriptures. I was taught modern Hebrew which relied on Sephardi pronunciation.

With time, when I got the hang of it, I could understand the general sense of what was said to me. Only my grandfather understood me perfectly and was proud I could speak the language of the Bible with such fluency.

Grandfather was very religious. He wore a beard and dressed in a long frock-coat. Each morning I watched him put on his tefillin and enjoyed that very much. He was very affectionate toward me. He talked to me about God. I knew very little and I was sorry about how little I knew. He told me the biblical stories. Once he told me the story of Moses and the stone tablets, then again about Abraham and the sacrifice he was supposed to make and how God stopped him. I can't remember exactly what my grandfather's interpretation was, but I think he wanted me to feel the dread of the sacrifice and the relief that it doesn't have to be made, that God does not require it.

Pesach began with seder, a marvelous dinner. It would start when men came back from the nearby Temple. I never went to the Temple so I can't exactly situate it. A girl who helped around the house would stay with me and my aunts' daughters. Throughout my stay - not only on this special

evening – I was always given lots of attention and surrounded with love and affection; I can still remember that.

One had to dress up for seder. I wore a dark blue dress with a navy collar trimmed with white ribbon. My dress was decorated with a black taffeta bow. The skirt was pleated. I wore good quality white stockings. One wore stockings then, there were no pantyhose yet. Elegant women wore thin gauzy stockings made of silk. Those were more expensive. Stockings of the best quality were called ‘kaisers’ [from Kaiser – Austro-Hungarian emperor]. I know, because one time, several years later, I bought ‘kaisers’ with my own money as a present for my mom.

As the men were back from the synagogue we sat down at a huge table in the ceremonial room. There was my family and my grandfather’s students. The table was covered with a beautiful damask table-cloth. The fabric was shiny and embroidered, the plates were those used for the special occasions.

The ceremony lasted very long. It started at seven and went on and on for many hours. My grandfather read the Haggadah in a melodic voice, beautifully describing the exodus from Egypt. I was the youngest at the table so I asked the four questions. I don’t know whether me being a girl didn’t matter or I was specially honored. I don’t know what the rules say. But I remember I was taught those questions before I left for my grandfather’s.

That night we only ate foods that were allowed. Allowed means they were prepared in a special way. For example, noodles were made from ground matzah, not from regular flour. The dishes symbolized various events which the holidays were commemorating. There were eggs in salty water and spiced parsley roots and horseradish. On the second day dinner was also celebrated but it didn’t last that long. Only that first evening was so solemn, and it lasted forever.

When the holidays were over I went back home. That was my only visit to my grandfather’s. Many years later – or maybe it wasn’t that many – he came to visit us. Special dishware was bought, because our house wasn’t kosher. One of his daughters came with him, the youngest one, Goldzia. She cooked for him while they were at our house. Grandfather had already turned gray and seemed very beautiful with his white beard. He was around 60 then. Soon after, he died; that was at the beginning of the 1930s. We were all very sorry that he passed away, but nobody said that he died too early. He simply lived his age.

After my grandfather’s death Aunt Goldzia came to stay with us in Boryslaw [south-west from Lwow, today in the Ukraine]. A romantic story happened then. Aunt Goldzia decided to make a summer dress for me. It was supposed to be a so-called peasant dress, with a short bodice, a richly-gathered skirt and an apron in a contrasting color. My aunt went to the mercer’s shop at the town square to get the fabric. And there she found love. She fell in love with the owner of that store and he fell in love with her.

She did get the fabric for my dress, by the way: a tiny flower pattern on a green background and a yellow apron. The owner of the store, Dawid, was soon her husband. They had two children, Alek and Fela. And then they were all killed of course.

We moved from Lwow to the Galician town of Boryslaw, with a newly opened Tarbut school, when I was around two. We lived at Panska Street. Boryslaw was situated in the midst of an oil-field

region. It was a pioneer town. Poor housing was built without any architectural plan next to tycoon residences; mines were part of the landscape. Beyond the town there were mountains. A cobblestone street ran down the middle. Boryslaw stretched to no end on an area which was apparently comparable to that of Warsaw.

It was a very busy town. People came from everywhere looking for employment in the mines. The proletariat was really enormous. Boryslaw's community was made up of Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians. Each of those groups constituted about a third of the population. The town grew together with the oil industry. Even water tasted of oil. Local mineral water was nicknamed oily. Apparently it had medicinal qualities, but I think it was foul.

The Tarbut school in Boryslaw, where my parents worked, had only six grades, when a full school should have eight. On graduating from the last grade one could continue education in other public schools. There were seven teachers on the staff. Since Saturdays were free, not only children of local Zionists, but also children from religious – though not zealously orthodox – families studied there. At the same time, the school drew children who may have been ostracized in Polish schools because of the political views of their parents, mostly those with communist leanings.

There were about 10-12 students in each grade. The school was co-educational. All students were Jewish. Many subjects were taught related to Jewish history and culture, where the language of instruction was Hebrew. History began with ancient Israel and was taught mostly based on the Torah. My mom taught grammar and contemporary Hebrew literature. My dad taught Hebrew. When my Uncle Simcha emigrated to the United States [in 1926], my father became the principal of the school.

My parents were the first decidedly non-religious generation in my family. My house was not kosher. We basically didn't celebrate holidays. During the holidays my parents usually went to Lwow to visit their friends. I went with them once, but otherwise I stayed with Aunt Goldzia who married the mercer's shop owner and lived in Boryslaw.

Holidays at my aunt's were sort of religious, but I can't remember that being a big deal. There was matzot for Pesach and a separate dish, but nothing very serious. I think Goldzia's husband went to the synagogue on Saturdays and his store was definitely closed for the Sabbath.

Maybe my father was not a total atheist, but he certainly didn't practice. I remember he went to the synagogue only during Yom Kippur. He said to me once when I was maybe 12, that God's place is in one's heart. Human beings don't have the strength within them to act justly and need to have an image of someone who leads them.

My mom, on the other hand, was an atheist and the specifically lay atmosphere in our home was her doing. She also liked to provoke. Once for our holidays we went to Krynica [a health resort in South-East Poland]. We stayed at a small pension. During our meals we talked in Hebrew, so all the guests knew we were Jewish. For the afternoon snack my mother always gave me a ham sandwich and specifically told me to go outside or to the park. People would stop me surprised and ask me, 'So you eat ham?' Jews were usually very careful and made sure not to do things that could surprise or irritate the non-Jews. But my mother wasn't like that, she liked to be contrary. She wanted to demonstrate her protest against orthodoxy.

Actually, neither of my parents spoke well of orthodox Jews whom they didn't like and criticized for hypocrisy. They said orthodox Jews are inflexible and thus became intolerant themselves. Obviously at the time I thought my parents are always right and I shared their negative views of orthodoxy.

Even though my family was non-religious, I participated in Jewish religion classes. There were no people without faith then. Both in elementary school and later, religion classes were compulsory and organized by faith: Roman-Catholic, Greco-Catholic and Jewish.

I can't remember the name of our teacher from elementary school; in secondary school we studied with Mr. Langerman. The teacher would come and tell us about the history of the Jews and about the events that we celebrate during holidays. The class started and ended with a prayer in Polish; in the school where my parents taught, the prayer was said in Hebrew. I found these classes incredibly boring. As soon as spring came I would cut school.

In my elementary school the day would start at 8am with a prayer. This was not a Jewish school, so a Catholic prayer was said, 'Our Father.' Jewish children would simply get up and not say anything. But they participated in that.

Once, already in secondary school, I went to a catholic religion class. The priest in my school was very fond of me - he'd always pinch my cheeks - and once he invited me to his classes. There were prayers in those classes and stories told about miracles. I remember that once they talked a lot about the Mother of God. I enjoyed that very much. I visited those classes two, three times. I never told my parents, because I felt that it was a faux pas of sorts, that I did something inappropriate.

I went to the Private Co-Educational Secondary School for the Humanities in Boryslaw. The school was located on Pod Lasem Street. I can't remember its name, but next to the Tarbut school and commerce school it was the only such school in town. It was an extremely modern school. The language of instruction was Polish. The building was financed by the community. It had a huge garden where botany classes were held. We were taught to distinguish various types of plants.

At school there were several workshops: for physics, bookbinding, handicrafts. Really, for those times, that was a very well-equipped school; the staff was excellent, almost all teachers had PhDs. Among the students there were both Catholics and Jews. Tuition was very high - 50-60 zlotys - which amounted to one white-collar salary or two worker's salaries. I got 50 percent discount because I was a teachers' daughter.

I always had wonderful holidays. Since I was a small child I went hiking in the mountains with my father. Boryslaw is situated near the eastern Bieszczady Mountains. My father loved hiking. Also during the school year we would go up the mountains every Sunday. Those were great excursions! On our way down we would stop at the tents of the mountain men where we drank sour milk and ate heavy dark bread with sweet butter. Then we would go back home.

In the summer we also went to health resorts, such as Krynica or Iwonicz [50 km south-east of Rzeszow, Poland]. One summer we went to Truskawiec, a very well-known spa in the vicinity of Boryslaw. Visitors came to take advantage of the medicinal qualities of local waters, of which most famous was the above-mentioned 'oily' one, drank from special pots with long spouts. Healing baths were also popular. Attendants would prepare the baths in tin tubs.

We lived at a small pension. Every day we went to the park with an outdoor concert area. The park was extremely well-kept with its flower-beds, rose-bushes and trees. There were also tennis courts in Truskawiec and an Olympic-size swimming pool, but even there the water reeked with oil.

I spent some of my holidays with my cousin Ala [Malka in Yiddish], who was Aunt Chana's daughter. We went to Skole [80 km south-west of Lwow], a small mountain town. I also spent a part of the summer at my Uncle Abraham's house in Gwozdziec, near Kolomyja. As I said earlier, Uncle Abram was my father's older brother, who raised my father after the death of their parents. I loved him and his family very much, they were really cool people, and Aunt Luba was so sweet.

They were traditional: milk separate from meat, definitely kosher, and my uncle went to the synagogue on Saturdays, but other than that they were quite liberal. Uncle loved my father unconditionally. He accepted everything my father did, never criticized him. Even after my father's death I went there during holidays, until the war, I think. I couldn't disappoint them by not coming.

When I was older I started going to summer camps. Most often I went to the nearby mountains [Bieszczady, Gorce, Czarnohora]. Those were private camps organized by the teachers. Children from all kinds of schools could go, but because the camps were quite expensive, not everyone could afford them. I can't remember exactly how much they cost, but probably only children of well-to-do parents had a chance of going. Maybe there was some additional funding, I don't know.

The camps were co-educational and we did everything together: ate, played, swam in the lake or the river, went hiking in the mountains, did sports and had lots of fun. I think such summer camps are very similar today. My favorite was a camp for university students I got into while still in secondary school thanks to a friend of my father's. We went to the Tatra Mountains. It was a wonderful experience. Most importantly I got to know the Tatra. In four weeks I hiked all the trails. I even went to Orla Perc [one of the most difficult trails in Tatra Mountains]. I got to know the mountains very well and caught the hiking germ.

My parents programmatically spoke Hebrew. They both knew Yiddish from home and German from school. When they didn't want me to understand what they were saying they communicated in German or Yiddish. My mother spoke and wrote excellent Polish. My father's Polish was not as good as my mother's because since the 6th grade he studied in a school where German was the language of instruction.

For my mom Hebrew was secondary in a sense. She used it for ideological reasons. It was Simcha, her older brother, who drew her to Zionism. She loved and respected him very much and possibly that's why she became so immersed in it.

One way or another, I was programmatically taught Hebrew ever since a small child. My first words - mom, dad - were in Hebrew. I also remember that one of the first words that I learned was: or, which means light. I started speaking Polish only when I started to go out to play with my friends and in my Polish school. At home I would sometimes exchange a word in Polish with my mom, but with my dad I always spoke in Hebrew.

My household was very politicized. Father combined Zionism and socialism. Actually, he was a mixture of various views and, to top it off, he was also a believer of sorts. He was a heartfelt Zionist who dreamed about a Jewish country as a land of cultivated Hebrew and social justice. He was a

member of Poalei Zion [3](#). Sometimes my father's views would verge on communism, but at the same time, he hated the Soviet Union. And so did my mother. She was a dualist in thought.

At home there were endless debates. As a teenage girl I was annoyed by them; those discussions were very passionate and I was raised in their midst. I had my own growing-up problems and wanted to have a normal, quiet home. Instead my home was torn by continuous verbal battles. My parents felt intensely about current affairs. Together with their friends they discussed Zionism, the situation in Palestine and anti-Semitic incidents. They also talked about literature and cultural events.

Among my father's friends the majority were leftist Zionists, but there were also people like Doctor Deutchmeister who was a member of the Bund [4](#). My father went to the May parades with him [Socialist and communist parades or demonstrations organized on Labor Day on 1st May]. They visited each other often to discuss Doctor Faustus, part two [Doctor Faustus, a play by J.W.Goethe (1724-1804)], and various dilemmas, such as Kant's theories [Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German philosopher] or something like that. The atmosphere of the small town of Boryslaw agreed with such home-spun philosophers.

This was the time of growing anti-Semitism, when difficulties at the universities began [5](#). Some people believed that they or their children should be able to live in a world where they would not be tormented any more, where they would be spared the suffering. The Zionist movement was developing, people started leaving for Palestine. They would pack up, get on a ship, overcome all sorts of obstacles and worked on establishing a Jewish state. Intelligentsia was farming the land, fertilizing, planting orange groves... All that was done for the future generations.

Had my father also thought about leaving for Palestine? I don't know, I never had a serious conversation with him about that. What he told me sounded like a beautiful fairy-tale. He said Hebrew will once join the Jewish people of all nations. He said that in the future there will be no poverty, that the Jewish people will go to Palestine, that everybody will have work and access to education. But he never talked about the details of how that was to be achieved. There was a good deal of romanticism in my father's beliefs. Or maybe there was realism?

I never thought of those as real plans that would concern us in the near future. I needed a few more years to be able to seriously talk to my father about all that. My mom also talked about Palestine, though after the death of my father less so. I think she assumed that wasn't a deep conviction. Palestine was a type of an antidote for what was happening to the Jews in the Diaspora.

For me Palestine was one of the stories Father told, and he told me many. He presented the whole biblical mythology or faith as a flow of beautiful tales. He conveyed all of it to me in a delightful manner. I really remember the pang in my heart when Hagar was cast out to the desert by Sarah and Abraham... I was really angry at Abraham. But although I knew the story of Hagar and the story of forty years in the desert, I didn't realize that Palestine is basically a desert land. Palestine was to become the land of plenty thanks to human effort. For me, the only homeland I knew was Poland: my house, my friends from the neighborhood, friends from school were what I could define as my own.

In childhood I was deeply immersed in everything Polish. At the same time I absorbed my parents' social views, even if I didn't belong to a Zionist youth organization. I believed in social justice, even

if justice was something I conceived in very simple terms. I thought there should be no poverty and people should have work. There was a large proletariat in Boryslaw and that was the time when many people lost work; the problem of unemployment came up a lot in conversation and in the newspapers.

We read both Polish and Hebrew newspapers. At home there always was a copy of 'Wiadomosci Literackie' [a literary-cultural weekly published in 1924-1939 in Warsaw]. My mother read that paper, my father less so; at some stage I started reading it, too. We also got literary and philosophical monthlies in Hebrew, several titles, out of which I remember one: 'Ofakim,' a literary journal.

In the Hebrew newspapers I mostly read poems, not political news, which was too difficult for me. Sometimes I would get interested in an article and read it, but otherwise I mostly flipped through the rest of the paper except for the poetry section.

On the whole, I didn't read in Hebrew much, but I read copiously in Polish, more than my age would indicate. I'm not even referring to the time when I was 15 or 16, but already at 12-13 I read things none of my peers read. That was something nurtured at home; I would never, ever be told, 'No, you can't read that.'

The library at our home was enormous for the times, with many books in German and Polish, mostly from the period of Romanticism. My parents did not limit themselves to Jewish culture. My father was an outstanding specialist in German literature and very knowledgeable about German art, while my mother was immersed in Polishness; passionate about Polish theater, she knew all Polish actors. Whenever she could, she went to theater performances in Lwow.

When I was eleven my mother took me to a performance with an actress who seemed extraordinarily beautiful to me. Now I know that was Modzelewska, but at the time I didn't realize that, of course [Maria Modzelewska (1901-1997), a well-known Polish actress who performed mostly in Cracow and Warsaw].

There was a Jewish House in Boryslaw. I can't remember what organization built it or even what its full name was. It housed many organizations of various political affiliations. For example, there were labor unions, leftist by definition, next to conservative organizations. There was an excellent library in the House, used by half of the town. One paid some small monthly fee. This library was really extremely popular and had all the most recent books. From time to time some writer would come to meet with readers. I once went to a meeting with Bruno Schultz [6](#).

In the building there were two rooms: one small and cozy, the other bigger where the meetings, readings and other cultural events were held. In the bigger room, which was on the first floor and had large arched windows, also prayers were held during holidays. I remember this only vaguely, but I think those prayers were held only during the most important holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. That's where the less religious people went. A cantor was there. That I remember well, because I heard him. His singing was very moving, unlike any other singing.

In the Jewish House there was also a huge room in which dances were held during the Jewish carnival, Chanukkah and Purim. An orchestra played in a decorated hall. I remember Mom dancing in a beautiful dress embroidered all over with tiny beads on a green background. High heeled

shoes, a scarf on her neck, hair up in a knot – she still wore her hair long –, she'd stand in front of the large mirror at home and my father, standing behind her, would tell her how beautiful she was.

There were also parties for children. I went at least twice. Children were dressed up as knights or biblical figures, for example Machabeus [Juda Machabeus was the leader of an uprising against Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the king of Syria, which broke out in 165 and lasted till 140 BC; his figure symbolized a hero fighting for the freedom of the Jews]. I also had a costume once, but I don't know what it was supposed to signify: a red, shiny dress with something sewn on at the bottom. The second time I went I can't remember if I had a costume or a party dress.

An orchestra played at kids' parties as well; not a gramophone or something like that, but a real orchestra! We danced in a circle, or girl with boy or girl with girl or a few girls together. There was a dance leader who led the party. I think my mom always got into it too, because I remember her from those kids' parties. They were attended mostly by the children of the intelligentsia and owners of the more elegant stores, such as fancy outfitters or exotic fruit stores. For example, the two daughters of Mr. Lindthard, a confectioner, came regularly.

Mr. Lindthard had a wonderful store and delicious sweets. I can't remember the name of the street where the store was; a flight of steps led up to it. Already at the door you could smell the sweets which were displayed on the counter in colorful wrappers. There were chocolates, fudge, Polish and foreign boxes of chocolates – Swiss, Viennese – and various other treats. The waffles were layered with chocolate and topped with special chocolate peaks. Those in silver wrappers were the best. They really tasted incredible. Or maybe it's just how I remember them. I always went there with Dad and also got some sweets from Mr. Lindthard as a present.

Jews, Poles, Ukrainians and Germans – of whom some lived in Boryslaw – rarely mixed. Those were relatively strong divisions, though class divisions were even stronger. The community was primarily divided into workers, tycoons and intelligentsia. Those groups varied as to the contacts between various religious denominations within them. I think that workers, for example, were better integrated than the intelligentsia. But then my mother did have friends who were non-Jewish.

Usually the children from the working-class families did not play with children of richer parents. I did, but you have to remember that I came from a family with a program [a progressive family which believed in social equality]. At our house – not every day, but on Saturdays or Sundays – our servant ate with us at the same table. Elsewhere that was unthinkable and had people seen us do that we would have been thought to be Bolsheviks [7](#).

We all went to the same elementary school, but there rarely was a working-class child in secondary school. Sometimes there was one, or two, for example children of the railway men who were the working-class aristocracy.

Anti-Semitism was somehow related to the Jewish enlightenment, to the fact that Jews emerged out of the isolated communities and started penetrating non-Jewish structures. They acquired education, stopped confining themselves to their own world. In the 19th century, Jews started perceiving themselves as part of the social fabric, as if they were no strangers to it. Paradoxically, it was when they started engaging themselves in the society at large, that the society recognized the Jewish presence in their midst, and saw it as alien and what's alien provokes hostility. Jews incited hostility.

In my childhood I never came across anti-Semitism. But then, as I said earlier, my school was rather peculiar. I know, for example, that things were different in Drohobycz, where Jews were marked: this is a Jew, this is a Jewess. As long as I lived in Boryslaw anti-Semitism did not concern me. And I had a nice name – Noemi – everyone liked it. But there were Yiddish names about which no one said they are beautiful. Such names as Rywka or Chana no one liked, no one was enthusiastic about.

Often children were given double names. They had a name in Yiddish which was used at home and on religious occasions when, for example, a man was called upon to read from the Torah in the synagogue, and its Polish, Europeanized version, which figured in the birth certificate. For example there were Rywka - Rebekas, Rywka - Reginas or Dora - Dorotas. Maybe that was a Galician phenomenon. I remember how surprised I was when I discovered my friend from Warsaw, called Renia, had the name Rywka in her birth certificate.

We, the children, got along well. There was no name-calling or anything like that. I never experienced that. But everyone knew who is Jewish and who isn't. Those divisions worked mostly along religious lines – Catholic, Greco-Catholic and Jewish – and were particularly visible at school because of the separation during religion classes. Which doesn't mean that we didn't have contacts with each other. We did spend our time together, both at school and after, when we played outside. We didn't go to each other's houses, but that wasn't something children did at the time anyway.

I had a Ukrainian friend. Her name was Oksana. She was very lively, very pretty, and she sang beautifully. We went to secondary school together. But then she moved somewhere else. Her father was also a teacher.

Since I could 'pass,' as they say, I was usually a witness to anti-Semitism rather than its victim. I was not taken for a Jew but for a confidant, one to whom they could turn and say how disgusting those Jews are.

I remember that once, when I was in Zakopane [100 km south from Cracow, a famous health and tourist resort in the Tatra Mountains] I wanted to go into the Fuks pastry shop at Krupowki [Zakopane's main street]. I was 16 then. A student picket stopped me in front of the door [Polish anti-Semitic students would stop non-Jews before entering Jewish stores; that was one of the anti-Semitic operations in the 1930s, known as: 'don't buy from the Jew']. They blocked my way and said, 'What is this, you're buying from a Jew?' To which I said, 'Yes, because I'm Jewish, too.' They stepped aside and I walked in. At the time I thought nothing of the event; it was no more than an adventure to me.

The situation got much worse in the second half of the 1930s. One could discern the change in the temperature of the debates which were carried out in my house. I didn't pay much attention to them, because I didn't understand politics enough to be interested. I had no independent life yet. At home they talked about anti-Semitic incidents which happened in Lwow and Cracow; something occurred in Drohobycz.

Right before Christmas students from Młodzież Wszechpolska [8](#) came over to sell what they called student fish. The point was to stop Christians from buying fish from Jews who owned fish stores. One could hear the slogan, 'Don't buy from a Jew.' In Zakopane, in the window of one of the cafés, I

saw a sign: 'Jews not allowed.'

The situation in education wasn't much better. Restrictions were placed on Jews [9](#). At the University of Lwow the situation wasn't very bad, but medicine became out of the question. My parents were planning to send me to study abroad.

Before the war there already were schools ironically called 'Judenfrei' [10](#). It was a term used in political jargon, in newspapers, even among young people themselves. Around national holidays - 11th November or 3rd May - riots sometimes started at universities. Pickets of Młodzież Wszechpolska were hunting for Jews. In the fall of 1938 or 1939 there were two deaths in Lwow: one at the Polytechnic, the other at the Department of Pharmacy of Lwow University [11](#). The man from the Polytechnic was my future husband's friend and for many years I remembered his name, but now I can't.

My father died toward the end of January 1935, when I was 13. He was a little over forty. Three years after his death my mother remarried and we moved to Drohobycz. We lived at Jagiellonska Street, near the town square, next to the church. After she remarried my mother stopped working at school, but she didn't give up teaching, which was her passion, and did private tutoring.

My stepfather, Adolf Drucker, was a banker. He managed a small bank in Drohobycz; I don't even know what the name of that bank was. He was a kind and subtle man. I addressed him by his first name, Dolek [Polish diminutive for Adolf]. Even before my father's death he was a good friend of my parents'. He endeared himself to me by trying to console me after my father's death which left me heartbroken.

I passed my matriculation exam just before the war, in 1939, in Drohobycz, in the Henryk Sienkiewicz High School. It was a private school, formally for girls only, but I remember there were two boys in our class, Zbyszek and Andrzej. At the exam I did Latin, Polish, a foreign language and math.

In October 1939 I went to study in Lwow. At first I lived in the dorm, but then I moved to a Lwow friend's house. I majored in economy, because economy was a popular field at the time. I started studying already after the Russians entered Lwow [12](#). The professorial staff was still mostly Polish, but there were also some new teachers who came from eastern Ukraine, from Kiev. Most of the classes were taught in Polish, but the so-called obligatory ideological subjects, such as Marxism and some type of economy class, were supposed to be taught in Ukrainian. But at the time everything was still so chaotic, that everybody spoke whatever they pleased.

I was no good as far as economy was concerned. At the time my head was full of theater ideas. I was involved in the student theater and couldn't care less about life around me. In the years 1939-1941 student theater life was quite lively. Indoctrination was not as intense as it was to become later, though, obviously, patriotic plays were out of the question. Most of the plays staged dealt with social issues. I did a Mickiewicz [13](#) evening and that was no problem.

At the theater I acted and directed and even wrote plays; one does everything at a student theater. I wanted my plays to address some of the contemporary problems. I couldn't speak of those directly, of course, so, for example, I wrote a play about the Paris Commune [Paris Commune, 18th March - 28th May 1871, a revolutionary and patriotic people's uprising in Paris]. The play dealt not

so much with the Commune itself as with its participants who were defeated. The starting point was a meeting of a painter, a musician and other young people who were trying to find themselves at the time of defeat. That was supposed to be an allusion. We had no problem staging that, because it was the Paris Commune anniversary. We learned language play and speaking in allusions.

I have to say I was unaware of many of the darker things happening at the time [September 1939-June 1941: Soviet occupation of Lwow] [14](#). I took pleasure in integration which happened among young people, in the fact that there were no divisions. I didn't notice those who felt uncomfortable. Only later did I realize that was the case.

At the time, I was enjoying young age and freedom. At the time, what mattered to me was the comradeship among young people. There were no obstacles for young people then, they had easy access to education, they could grow as artists – it was really something. There were excellent actors in Lwow – many of them escaped to Lwow from Warsaw.

I started going to concerts frequently and it was worth it, as artists from the far Republics of the Soviet Union came to play and music was highest quality there; those musicians were recipients of many awards. Despite the fact that I was schooled in music from childhood – I had piano lessons – only in Lwow I really learned to appreciate classical music.

I was away from home and independent, receiving a scholarship on which I could easily support myself and on top of that I was getting various treats from home. I thought everybody else is happy too, being young... I basically did not realize what was going on, that we were in the midst of World War II.

It all lasted till April 1941, when people associated with Lwow's pre-war authorities began to be taken away [15](#). Many of them were denounced. Parents of many of my friends, fugitives from Warsaw and Cracow were taken away. Those events shocked me so much that I stopped liking this Soviet new order. I began to be very critical, but that did not last long. When in June 1941 the war broke out [16](#), I forgot all of that criticism. Because then, the pre-war reality became my whole lost world; in my perception, it was the essence of freedom. Now came the time of the Holocaust and human hunt.

Until the outbreak of the German-Russian war I spent my holidays in Drohobycz. My stepfather was still working at the bank, now nationalized, where the Russians gave him the position of the director. When it became clear that Germans will invade Drohobycz, my stepfather wanted to get away, for it was more than clear what fate awaits the Jews when the Germans arrive. People had a foretaste of that when around 10th September 1939 the Germans came to Drohobycz. They were there only for a few days, but they already managed a small pogrom in the Jewish district.

My stepfather was right, but my mother said that she won't go, because she doesn't know what's happening with me. Obviously my stepfather agreed to stay. They sent a letter to me through some railway man. I went back to Drohobycz then. I started working at a horticultural farm, away from the town, so I didn't know what was happening there. And a lot was happening.

The Germans were undertaking anti-Jewish operations. Finally it came to that major one, when half of the Jews in Drohobycz were killed and the rest were caught and sent to Belzec [17](#). It is in this

operation that my mother and my stepfather were killed. I survived because at that time I was at the farm. [In 1939, 17,000 Jews lived in Drohobycz. At the beginning of July 1941 German pogroms began; several thousand people were taken to Belzec, the rest were locked up in a ghetto created in October 1942; most of them died in Bronice forest on 21st June 1943. Around 400 Jews from Drohobycz survived the war.]

Since, as they say, I could pass, my friend fixed me with documents in the name of Franciszka Korsan. I left the farm, went back to Lwow and stayed with my friends there. It wasn't very safe, but I wasn't thinking. I knew German well, so I started working at some office as a kind of an errand-boy. I rented a room with strangers, at Hauke-Bossaka Street, near Leon Sapieha [one of Lwow's main streets].

One day I ran into two friends on the street: the sister of a seamstress I knew and her cousin; we knew each other from the Drohobycz secondary school. They were coming from Warsaw where they ran into szmalcownicy [18](#). They were completely robbed, but at least they survived. They had no idea what to do next.

The owners of the apartment where I rented the room were rather primitive people. Besides me, they had other tenants; two students of the Polytechnic rented the room next to mine. I took the girls with me. One of them - the seamstress's sister's cousin - had some plan as to what to do next; she even had an arranged job. But the other, Edzia, as the seamstress's sister was called, had no idea what to do. I decided to find documents for her.

She was a pretty girl, who unfortunately spoke with an accent, so she had to stay home for the time-being. I only asked her to stay away from the students next door: no contacts. I told the landlady she came to see a doctor. Edzia was supposed to stay in bed and pretend to be sick, until I bring her the papers, which meant at least a week.

ID documents, most importantly the 'Kennkarte' [19](#), could be variously obtained. Some people used a chain of friends and acquaintances, others bought the papers one way or another. The price depended on how you got the documents and what quality they were, 300 zlotys on the average. There were fake 'Kennkarten' which were forged, and real ones issued to a person who was dead. I had an authentic one which had belonged to a woman named Korsan, ten years my senior. Most importantly, those documents had to match the register books. One had to contact the priests who could change the entries in those books: they would enter new names or erase the dates of death.

As soon as I left Edzia alone in the apartment for the first time, however, she quickly got bored and started flirting with the students. They quickly saw through her and realized that she was Jewish. I didn't know anything until I heard the gendarmes - two Germans and one Ukrainian - knock on our door at night. They only asked for her documents, nothing else. Edzia did not have her documents yet, so they took her.

I remembered Edzia telling me that if something happened I should notify the commander at Batory Street, for whom she used to work back in Drohobycz. I went there the next day, but he wasn't there. Finally he arrived at 5 in the afternoon and said he was busy and I should leave a message with the secretary. So I left a note saying that Edzia was very sick and was taken away last night. And that was it. [Editor's note: It was impossible to establish what had happened to Edzia.]

After the night visit of the gendarmes and Edzia's capture I couldn't go back to the room. Especially that now I knew those students would give me away if they found out I was Jewish. This was December 1942. During the day I walked the streets, sometimes I stepped into the building of the main post-office to warm up. Then I looked for a hallway in a big house, where I could hide under the stairs. I waited for curfew for the building to be locked up. Then I crouched under those stairs from 8 in the evening till 6 in the morning. I lived like that for two weeks.

One day I remembered that I used to know a janitor who lived in one of the buildings at Sykstulska Street. He was Ukrainian, but a very decent man. I went there and he let me wash up and spend the night. For the first time in a long time I could read a newspaper in the morning. In that newspaper I found an ad for a nanny.

In the morning I went to the address from the ad. When I walked in I froze. There were around ten candidates there and at a glance I could tell they were all Jewish with false papers. It turned out that the woman advertising for a nanny was a singer, a Ukrainian Reichsdeutsche [citizen of the German Reich]. She liked me and gave me the job.

On the same day I left with her and her husband for the small Ukrainian town of Bolechow, near Stryj. Her husband was from that region. Before the war he was a Ukrainian nationalist. In 1939 he went to Germany escaping a sentence for his political activity. He came back in 1941 as a German.

I spent a few months in Bolechow [until the spring of 1943]. I was to take care of two girls; one was five, the other several months old. The problem was I had no idea how a child is put together. Luckily there was a girl there, a housemaid. We bonded right away. She was also a Jew with Aryan papers. Her documents were issued in the name of Zofia Marszalek.

She was not much older than I was, but she had had many siblings and knew about children. She was resourceful and cheerful. She was wonderful. She taught me everything. She was a guardian, a mother and a sister to me. At night, when our employers went to sleep, we'd cease to be 'Miss Zosia' and 'Miss Frania' and called each other by our real names: I called her 'Bronia' and she called me 'Noemi.' This kept us alive. It was a blessing to be able every day to be oneself for a moment.

Our employers were terrible people. Every morning Madam would greet us by saying, 'You rotten Laszki' [from 'Lach' - a Pole]. Bronia was supposed to be the bad one, and I was supposed to be better, because I attended to the children. I was closer to the employers, while the rest were servants.

Finally my dear Bronia - officially Zosia - got into a conflict with our employer. One Sunday she came to work at 6 and not at 5am as she was supposed to. Madam hit her and Bronia hit back. She had to run away then, because Madam reported the incident to the Gestapo.

I was left alone. Madam got bored with only the children and myself for company and decided to move back to Lwow. The older girl was to go to a German daycare and the smaller one I was to take care of until Madam found someone else. Later, as a reward for good conduct, I was supposed to go back to Bolechow, where Madam's husband was to give me a job in a furniture factory.

That's what they promised, but soon I realized that Madam had no intention of sending me back. Since I, in turn, had no intention of staying with her in Lwow, I went back to Bolechow, claiming I

brought clothes only for a few days and I needed to pick up the rest of my belongings.

In Bolechow I told that woman's husband that I didn't want to go back to Lwow, that I wanted to stay. But he was afraid of his wife and true enough, I did lie to her, so of course he didn't give me the job. But that was ok, because I went to the 'Arbeitsamt' [German: employment office] and I was sent, on the basis of my false documents, to another small town, called Skole, where I got employment in a German construction company called Hochtief. That was at the end of April, beginning of May, 1943.

Skole was beautiful. I was located at the heart of Bieszczady. The only problem was that the town lay on the route to Hungary and a refugee trail ran through it, so in the little town there was a huge, reinforced Gestapo and 'Grenzschutz' [German: border patrol]. That posed a serious danger to me. The risk of me being discovered hiding with false papers was much greater there than somewhere else. To make matters worse, the manager of the company where I worked started flirting with me.

I managed to find a job in a rival firm, a sawmill under the authority of the Ministry of War. Its advantage was that it was situated on the outskirts of town. I was supposed to be a stenographer. I had no experience with stenography, but I ordered a textbook from Cracow and managed somehow. Soon, two or three weeks later, the Gestapo came for me. Probably someone denounced me as a Jew.

Usually no one arrested by the Gestapo came back alive. I gave them my false name and lied as best I could. It was a Saturday. They interrogated me all day and then locked me up in a shed they called detention room. The man who was locking me up said, 'In a few hours you'll find out if you're going home or up there,' pointing to the sky.

I was exhausted, so I fell asleep as soon as I sat down on the wooden pallet. I don't know how much time passed when I was woken up by the clatter of opening doors. The man who locked me up comes in and says, 'Guess where you're going.' So I ask, 'Did you consider the matter carefully?' 'Yes,' he says. 'Then I'm going home,' I say. He looked at me apprehensively and finally said, 'Congratulations.'

In what I told during the interrogation there was only one word of truth: I was sent to this job by the 'Arbeitsamt.' The rest was baloney. I told them I had an uncle, a whole family in fact, in Boryslawiec... some absurd fibs like that. It was a Saturday and they probably didn't feel like checking it all out. Maybe that man thought that if they lock me up in the shed for a few hours, they'll break me. I don't know. One way or another, I stayed in Skole until July 1944, working in the sawmill.

When in the summer of 1944 the Germans started running away, they ordered an evacuation, because the front line was to go through the town. I had many friends in the town and a family that was taking care of me. These were local people. I convinced them not to go with the Germans, but to run away into the woods, for we would be free very soon. Many people did that. The locals went into the mountains, into inaccessible regions, for the time when the fighting was going on.

In my group, the most important person was 'Aunt' Wila, who was hiding with her kids. We had a goat and we built tents in the woods. Because it was summer, the weather was beautiful, but

unfortunately there was not a drop of rain, so there were no berries or mushrooms. We used water from the mountain streams. Aunt Wila made nettle soup. The goat milk was very precious and mostly the children got it, but sometimes I got a drop, too, because I was very emaciated.

Sometimes we went down with knapsacks and collected potatoes and other vegetables from the fields. Once during such an excursion we were caught by a German patrol, but they let us go in exchange for a ring. Obviously we were there as locals, only I was Jewish, but nobody knew about that. Once we found several bottles of oil in an abandoned tent. The people who lived there must have decided to move higher into the mountains. We survived like that till October 1944.

In October, the front line did move up very close. We could see fireballs flying. Everybody was really scared, but I loved it. A few days later we heard a humming sound and then saw a small group of Soviet soldiers move into town. Two or three days later I decided to go to Lwow to see who was still there. But to get to Lwow I had to go to Stryj. I went there in some military vehicle; I think it was an open truck.

I had an address in Stryj. Back in Skole, when I was desperately seeking contact with an underground organization, because I wanted to do something against the Germans, I met a boy from Stryj. His father was a judge and his uncle was General Sosabowski. [Maj. Gen. Stanislaw Sosabowski (1892-1967) was a Polish general in World War II. He fought in the Battle of Arnhem (Netherlands) in 1944 as commander of the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade.]

This friend once said that if I'm ever in Stryj and need help I should go to his family and say I know him. At the time I was in need, so I found his house where his mother and his aunt lived. They took me in and were very nice to me. I could wash up, lay in a wonderful clean bed with fresh sheets, I got scrambled eggs for breakfast and was treated as a daughter or someone else very close. In the morning I said goodbye and went out on the road to Lwow to catch a truck. I was walking down the road, when I heard a voice calling me by name: 'Noemi.' I turn around and see a skinny guy, in an oilcloth quasi-army coat. That was my close friend from Lwow, Kuba.

Kuba [Polish diminutive for Jakub] was born in Vienna in 1919. At home, among the family, he was called Majer Jankiel, but his birth certificate said Jakub. He had a brother, Josef, who was six years older. The family of his mother, Olga, nee Rothbard, came from Bolechow; the family of his father, Ozjasz Ekert, came from Stryj. They were traditional Jews; the mother did not wear a wig, but the father went to the synagogue every week, prayed, and raised his children in the same way. At home they spoke Yiddish, but they all were fluent in German as well, since they lived under Austrian partitions.

The best known person in the family was Kuba's grandfather, Lejb, who had a small sweets factory in Stryj with a branch established later in Vienna. Even Strykowski [20](#) mentions this factory in one of his stories. Ozjasz - Grandfather Lejb's son and Kuba's father - received a journeyman's or master's qualifications, I can't remember which, and took over a branch in Vienna. Several years later, in 1921, for some reason they went back to Stryj. Apparently they were a well-known family.

I had no idea Kuba was in Stryj. It turned out he was saved together with his brother. The two of them and a group of their friends shared an apartment in Stryj. Kuba took me there. We were young, happy and saved: we had a wonderful time! I stayed with them for three or four days and then went to Lwow. I didn't find my friends there, only caught a trace that one of them was in

Cracow. I also went to Drohobycz. I met two women I knew and one closer friend. I knew what happened to my parents and from the people I met I learned about the later plight of the Drohobycz Jews during the war. I went back to Stryj.

Later I went to Lwow one more time. I recovered some of my things. I went to the Polytechnic to get certificates for Kuba and his brother: Kuba completed three years at the Polytechnic and his brother was a graduate. I also went to the theater and ran into Bardini there [Aleksander Bardini (1913–1995), a well-known Polish director and actor]. I had met him several years earlier, after I'd won some competition on the radio. Bardini gave me a letter to take to Cracow, to one of the actors from a theater studio. When I went back to Stryj, I announced that I was going to Cracow.

Repatriations already started at that time [21](#). We signed up with Kuba and his brother. We left in April 1945 and made our way to Cracow. Repatriation was not really obligatory. People volunteered because they felt trapped. Poles were leaving and what was left of the Jews. The only people that stayed behind were those deep in the Soviet Union and those who had binding family ties. I think everybody who could, left.

Most people escaped to the West, but we were of a different mentality. We knew right away we would stay in Cracow. That was my mother's dream-city. In some way, I felt it was kin to Lwow. We traveled in Spartan conditions, by freight trains. We were young and full of hope, but the conditions were really lousy. The train stopped in Tarnow for several days, as the war was still going on. But finally we arrived in Cracow.

In Cracow we went to the appointed gathering place in Hotel Polonia, near the train station. It is a very big hotel and many people stayed there until they were assigned an apartment or a room in a shared apartment. Everybody was looking for work. In that hotel I met many of my pre-war acquaintances. We got a temporary room, quite decent in fact. We had no money and the hot soups handed out daily to the repatriates helped a lot.

Kuba enrolled at the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy, where a Polytechnic Department was created. That meant, among others, that he got free soup at school. What's more, he and the other students got occasional employment doing cleaning jobs in town. They were very badly paid, but still that was a start. And anyway, that was such a happy time that we didn't even worry that we have no means to support ourselves.

I remember soldiers selling things they stole in the western part of Poland, in Silesia. One could buy those for very little and sell them for more. And so it went. Kuba and his brother started tutoring. They were brilliant mathematicians. The money from that somehow supported us. Then I went to Lodz and got a scholarship there. Kuba also got a scholarship from the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy.

Kuba and I decided that we would not formally get married. After those years spent with false names and on false documents, after all that we'd gone through, we did not want formal procedures. At the time of the Germans, the lack of documents meant a sentence. That was a daunting experience. And anyway, we didn't care for a slip of paper. That was below our dignity. Instead of celebrating a wedding we went to the office and, taking our friends for witnesses, we filed a declaration that we are married to each other.

At the time many people had no documents, having lost them during the war. Duplicates were issued on the basis of declarations. I had to get a duplicate of my ID, so I got a duplicate of my marriage certificate, too. After the war I had three names at my disposal: Ekert, after my husband, Korsan, from the occupation, and my family name, Presser. I decided my name would be Noemi Korsan-Ekert, for I liked the sound of it.

In 1948 Kuba's brother, Jozef, left for Paris. He didn't really want to go, but his fiancée returned with her entire family from the Soviet Union, where they survived the war, and the family insisted to leave. Kuba's parents were killed during the first anti-Jewish operation, as soon as the German army came, in 1941. It happened on the first day of the Jewish New Year [Rosh Hashanah]. I know because at Kuba's brother's house in Paris, where he lived until his death, on the eve of the New Year there were always two candles burning to commemorate the death of their parents.

Iwo Gal ran an actor's studio in Cracow. One day I read an announcement that they were recruiting so I went and was accepted. I was there for a few months, from April until I got angry with Gal and went to Lodz to the pre-war PIST [Panstwowy Instytut Sztuki Teatralnej: State Institute for Theater Arts], which later became PWST [Panstwowa Wyzsza Szkola Teatralna: State Higher Theater School].

State Institute for Theater Arts was founded in Warsaw before the war, the only school of the kind in Poland. There were also little studios, usually run by well-known actors, but PIST was the only higher school where you could get an education in theater arts. The creator and soul of the Department of Directing was Leon Schiller [(1887 - 1954), theater director, critic and theorist].

After the war, PIST was reactivated in Lodz, since Warsaw was in ruin. So I went to Lodz to take my exams. When I arrived I found out it was too late. The exams were over. I was inconsolable. I was leaving the office, tearful and sniffing, when I was approached by Aleksander Zelwerowicz himself [(1877-1955), actor, director]. Obviously I had no idea whom I was talking to. He asked me why I'm crying, so I said I was late, and he told me to come the next day. I was added to the list of candidates, then I passed the exam, went to school, and graduated.

The first theater in which I was engaged as an actress was in Katowice. It had a branch in Opole which was run by Irena and Tadeusz Byrscy. I liked those two so much, they seemed so different, so anti-routine that I declared I wanted to go to Opole to join them. Everybody thought I was crazy, but I went anyway. After a year they lost that place and I was engaged in Cracow, in Slowacki Theater.

My husband had just graduated and worked as a junior assistant at the Cracow Polytechnic. A few years later our child was born, Ruth. My husband was offered to move to Warsaw, to work at the University and at the Ministry of Higher Education as a Deputy Director at the Department of Technical Studies.

We went to Warsaw and then I discovered the Byrscy were running a theater in Kielce. I was so filled with faith about theater's mission that, having a small baby and having to organize childcare and a place to live, I still went to Kielce. Every free day I would go to Warsaw. I lasted four years like that. But when the Byrscy couple moved again, this time to Poznan, it was too much for me. I decided to enroll at the Department of Directing.

One day, in 1965, I got a phone call. An acquaintance was asking if I remembered Maryla Metonomaska. I said I did. 'Well,' she said, 'Maryla lives in Jaroslaw [a town in south-east Poland, 300 km east of Cracow] and makes a living as a worker. But she would like to work at a library. She needs a witness that she graduated from high school. She doesn't have any papers, she changed her identity during the war and burned all her documents...'

I met Maryla when I was 15. She fascinated me. The story of her childhood sounded like a teary novel. Later I found out that her stories were not entirely true, but it does not matter, I was convinced they were. She told me about her mother who was a dancer. When Maryla was two, her parents separated. Her mother moved to Vienna, remarried and had another child, a boy. Maryla lived at her father's home. She was raised by her grandparents, a spinster aunt and various governesses. Maryla lived convinced that they were preventing her from seeing her mother. She hated them all, maybe with the exception of the grandparents.

That was a well-to-do, assimilated Jewish family. They lived in Lwow. They obviously all had higher education. Maryla, who was good at languages, had lessons of French and German. But she was terribly rebellious. Already in secondary school she was active in a quasi-communist organization. Basically, she wanted to destroy everything.

At 19, to spite her family, she married a working-class boy - a very handsome son of some janitors. Instead of studying at university, she got employment as a worker at a spoon factory. I saw her last when the Germans invaded Lwow [in 1941].

After that phone call, when I found out she had survived, I went to Jaroslaw to see her. She had two children and didn't quite know how to support herself and how to live. I started visiting her and trying to help. Several years later she died.

My husband brought her children from Jaroslaw. The boy, Wiktor, graduated from high school. Kuba managed to get him a scholarship and Wiktor went to study in Czechoslovakia. The girl, Iwona, stayed with us and became our second daughter. She is six months older than Ruth and they think of each other as sisters.

When I graduated from the Department of Directing in Warsaw, my student colleague, or in fact a close friend, Leszek Komarnicki, became the director of a theater in Szczecin [north-west of Poland] and invited me to come there as a director. From time to time, when there was a part which interested me and they thought it's a part for me, I acted, too. But mostly I directed.

As an actress, I played dramatic parts and distinctive, sometimes comic, characters. I directed various plays, by Mrozek [Slawomir Mrozek (b. 1930), Polish playwright, prose writer and satirist], Ibsen [Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Norwegian playwright and theater director], Shakespeare, a true variety. I traveled around Poland a lot: to Wroclaw, Lublin, Olsztyn, Szczecin, Warsaw, I even went to Tarnow. And that's what I did until my retirement.

I worked with the Jewish Theater in Warsaw only once. The problem was that I don't know Yiddish. Still, Szurmiej invited me to do 'Zydowka z Toledo' [Szymon Szurmiej (b. 1923), actor, director, head of the State Jewish Theater in Warsaw; 'Zydowka z Toledo,' 'Die Jüdin von Toledo,' ['A Jewess of Toledo'], a historical drama by Austrian playwright, Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872)]. 'Zydowka z Toledo' is not a play, but a novel, so I had to adapt it. It was translated into Yiddish by a brilliant

poet from Szczecin; I think it was Eliaz Rajzman [actor, poet from Kowl].

Here's how I worked on it: I had a Polish text exactly matching the text of the original, word for word; after a while, I began to understand what the actors were saying; then, I began to know if they were saying it right or wrong.

In my adaptation, the Jewess's father was the main protagonist; she seemed only a pretext to me. I focused on the theme of the attack on the father, that's where the weight of the play lay for me. It made sense to me as a story of a man who is besieged because he is different, even though he's done great service, having been a minister of finance of sorts. I think that at the censorship office they knew exactly what I was after. The year was 1971, soon after 1968 [22](#). The play was taken off by the censorship even before dress rehearsals.

1968 affected us very badly. Very badly. My husband lost his position on the charge that he supported the funds for the opposition, which wasn't even true. Kuba had little to do with the opposition, he simply knew some of the people. Our friend, or actually my friend, Szymon Szechter, a historian from Lwow, had a private secretary because he was blind. The secretary's name was Nina Karsof. Allegedly my husband was collecting money for them. But it was me who saw Szechter, heard he was in need and helped him financially, not my husband. My husband only knew Szechter through me and anyway they had hardly any contacts with each other. But that was only a pretext.

After the war we didn't really realize the extent of anti-Semitism. The worst was the state anti-Semitism of 1968. Apparently 1956 was bad, too, but that's when the emigration started; very many people left. I didn't feel - we didn't think - we didn't take anti-Semitism seriously.

But when this official anti-Semitism began in 1968, it was terrible. It damaged some kind of trust we had, we were in despair. But we never thought of leaving. Kuba, my husband, claimed he couldn't survive ruined abroad. And I couldn't imagine surviving abroad, period. I couldn't imagine living permanently abroad. I had everything that was mine here. And even this filth of 1968, that was mine, too. That's what I thought. But the experience was emotionally draining.

Our daughters were still small kids then. Iwona had no Jewish awareness at all at the time. She was very worried that we're going to leave. Ruth had just begun to feel Jewish. That was the beginning of her awareness... Not that there were taboo subjects in our house, she had always known everything, she had known who her grandparents were, but it never mattered at all. But then she began to feel Jewish. She developed a deep interest, began learning about Jewish history and culture. Now she really knows a lot about Jews. Ruth calls herself a Polish Jew. She doesn't want to be called a Pole of Jewish origin. She is simply a Polish Jew.

For Iwona that process was very strange. She was very, very scared of the subject, because her mother did everything to spare her children from Jewishness. Maryla had experienced terrible things because she was Jewish and she never talked about that. Her children were baptized. Iwona is light and has Slavic features. Sometimes she would be called Zydowa [a racial slur for a Jewish woman] and she didn't know what that means, so she'd ask her mother. Maryla was extremely upset then and Iwona became afraid of the topic, too. We haven't indoctrinated her at all. But she knew everything; only she avoided the subject.

When she got married she baptized her children, although she was not religious. She was very neurotic and we did everything we could to soothe her, to help her adjust. When she was a grown-up woman, she read in the paper that there exist workshops for people who are having problems with their identity; I never knew about that. She signed up for a workshop and it helped her amazingly. She started participating in various other workshops and finally began saying out loud that she comes from the Jews. She told her children. And she is fine. She figured it out for herself.

In 1968, Kuba got employment in the Institute of Meteorology as a head of a department; the climate department, I think. He had an education as an engineer in water construction, so he was fine for the job, but obviously, in comparison to his previous position, that was a huge degradation.

My husband worked also as a volunteer in the Jewish Historical Institute [23](#). He collected materials. He was an engineer by profession but a historian by temperament. He was always interested in the history of the Jews and was very knowledgeable. As for those times, he knew that history incredibly well. I couldn't fathom where he knew all of that from. Kuba died six years ago [1998].

Ten years ago my cousin found me. Howard [Hagaj] Gelb was the son of Simcha, my mother's eldest brother. Hagaj was born in Poland; in 1926 he emigrated with his parents to the United States and changed his name to Howard, for that other, Hebrew one, was unpronounceable to Americans. In the States he finished law school. During World War II he fought in the American army. After the war he worked as a lawyer, later as a real estate agent.

His brother Saadia, who was a journalist, went to Palestine. He still lives there. His other brother, Amiel, died a few years ago. His sister, Awiwa - Vivien - worked as a psychologist; she died three years ago.

Howard came to Poland, the country of his childhood, with his wife. She was born in the States into a family of Latvian Jews. One day I heard the doorbell ring and when I opened the door a woman standing there showed me a name card with 'Howard Gelb' written on it and asked me if that name means anything to me. I said my mother's maiden name was Gelb. She told me then that this Howard Gelb is my cousin and is searching for me.

As it turned out, she was a tourist guide whom Hagaj hired to look for me in Warsaw, while he went to Kolbuszowa where our grandfather once lived. He also searched for me in Cracow, because right after the war I contacted his father and my uncle, only I used my occupational name then. We were still quite obsessive after the war... Anyway, he was looking for me as Franciszka Korsan, a name nobody knew me by over there. But he finally found me as Noemi Korsan-Ekert and our joy was great.

We were together for several days and I became very close to him and so did my husband. They became very good friends; one could say they operated on the same wavelength. When Howard went back to the States, among the family papers he found photographs of my mother and father and sent them to me. These are the only pre-war photographs I have. The rest was lost.

When at the beginning of the 1990s a revival of Jewish life began in Warsaw, I was rather skeptical. I remember that when I learned that some beginnings of a Jewish school were attempted [Lauder School], I thought it fake, strange and at odds with the reality around. But it turns out I was wrong.

Sometime later, at my friend's birthday, a young handsome man, a director, was introduced to me. I started talking to him and all of a sudden I was dumbfounded: I realized he was wearing a yarmulka. A young man in a yarmulka would have been unthinkable a few years earlier! I continue to meet people who came to feel some connection to the Jewish world; not always through the synagogue, sometimes they simply discover a sense of a community. I was wrong. Maybe even what was done thus far means an enduring revival.

Glossary

1 Tarbut schools

Elementary, secondary and technical schools maintained by the Hebrew educational and cultural organization called Tarbut. Most Eastern European countries had such schools between the two world wars but there were especially many in Poland. The language of instruction was Hebrew and the education was Zionist oriented.

2 Partitions of Poland (1772-1795)

Three divisions of the Polish lands, in 1772, 1793 and 1795 by the neighboring powers: Russia, Austria and Prussia. Under the first partition Russia occupied the lands east of the Dzwina, Drua and Dnieper, a total of 92,000 km² and a population of 1.3 million. Austria took the southern part of the Cracow and Sandomierz provinces, the Oswiecim and Zator principalities, the Ruthenian province (except for the Chelm lands) and part of the Belz province, a total of 83,000 km² and a population of 2.6 million. Prussia annexed Warmia, the Pomerania, Malbork and Chelmno provinces (except for Gdansk and Torun) and the lands along the Notec river and Goplo lake, altogether 36,000 km² and 580,000 souls. The second partition was carried out by Prussia and Russia. Prussia occupied the Poznan, Kalisz, Gniezno, Sieradz, Leczyca, Inowroclaw, Brzesc Kujawski and Plock provinces, the Dobrzyn lands, parts of the Rawa and Masovia provinces, and Torun and Gdansk, a total of 58,000 km² and over a million inhabitants. Russia took the Ukrainian and Belarus lands east of the Druja-Pinsk-Zbrucz line, altogether 280,000 km² and 3 million inhabitants. Under the third partition Russia obtained the rest of the Lithuanian, Belarus and Ukrainian lands east of the Bug and the Nemirov-Grodno line, a total area of 120,000 km² and 1.2 million inhabitants. The Prussians took the remainder of Podlasie and Mazovia, Warsaw, and parts of Samogitia and Malopolska, 55,000 km² and a population of 1 million. Austria annexed Cracow and the part of Malopolska between the Pilica, Vistula and Bug, and part of Podlasie and Masovia, a total surface area of 47,000 km² and a population of 1.2 million.

3 Poalei Zion (the Jewish Social-Democratic Workers' Party Workers of Zion)

In Yiddish 'Yidishe Socialistish-Demokratishe Arbeiter Partei Poale Syon.' A political party formed in 1905 in the Kingdom of Poland, and operating throughout the Polish state from 1918. The party's main aim was to create an independent socialist Jewish state in Palestine. In the short term, Poalei Zion postulated cultural and national autonomy for the Jews in Poland, and improved labor and living conditions of Jewish hired laborers. In 1920, during a conference in Vienna, the party split, forming the Right Poalei Zion (the Jewish Socialist Workers' Party Workers of Zion), which became part of the Socialist Workers' International and the World Zionist Organization, and the Left Poalei Zion (the Jewish Social-Democratic Workers' Party Workers of Zion), the radical minority, which

sympathized with the Bolsheviks. The Left Poalei Zion placed more emphasis on socialist postulates. Key activists: I. Schiper (Right PZ), L. Holenderski, I. Lew (Left PZ); paper: Arbeiter Welt. Both fractions had their own youth organizations: Right PZ: Dror and Freiheit; Left PZ - Jugnt. Left PZ was weaker than Right PZ; only towards the end of the 1930s did it start to form coalitions with other socialist and Zionist parties. In 1937 Left PZ joined the World Zionist Organization. During WWII both fractions were active in underground politics and the resistance movement in the ghettos, in particular the youth organizations. After 1945 both parties joined the Central Jewish Committee in Poland. In 1947 they reunited to form the strongest legally active Jewish party in Poland (with 20,000 members). In 1950 Poalei Zion was dissolved by the communist authorities.

4 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.

5 Anti-Semitism in Poland in the 1930s

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

6 Schultz, Bruno (1892-1942)

Painter, graphic artist and writer of Jewish descent who wrote in Polish. He was born and lived in Drohobycz (today Ukraine). He studied architecture in Lwow and painting in Vienna. He made his literary debut in 1933 with the novel "The Street of Crocodiles" ("Sklepy cynamonowe"). His second book, a collection of short stories "Sanatorium Under the Sight of the Hourglass," was published in 1937. Both were highly praised in Warsaw literary circles. He uses poetic prose and his books are known for their freedom of composition and elements of mysticism and fantasy. He was also a literary critic. His paintings did not survive the war, only the drawings and illustrations did, among which the best known is the volume "The Book of Idolatry" ("Xiega Balwochwalcza") and the illustrations he did for his own "Sanatorium Under the Sight of the Hourglass" and Witold Gombrowicz's novel "Ferdynand." From 1924 on, Schultz was an art teacher in Drohobycz. He was shot and died in the Drohobycz ghetto.

7 Bolsheviks

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

8 Młodzież Wszechpolska

A student organization, nationalist and anti-Semitic in character, created in 1918, ideologically linked with Narodowa Demokracja, most influential in academic circles. Reactivated underground during the war, in 1943. After 1945 failed attempts at legalization as a party. In 1989 the organization was reactivated at a convention of nationalist Catholic youth in Poznan (current president of the board: Roman Giertych).

9 Numerus clausus in Poland

After World War I nationalist groupings in Poland lobbied for the introduction of the numerus clausus (Latin: closed number - a limit on the number of people admitted to the practice of a given profession or to an institution - a school, a university, government office or association) in relation to Jews and other ethnic minorities. The most radical groupings demanded the introduction of the numerus nullus principle, i.e. a total ban on admittance to universities and certain professions. The numerus nullus principle was violated by the Polish constitution. The battle for its introduction continued throughout the interwar period. In practice the numerus clausus was applied informally. It depended on decision of deans or university presidents. In 1938 it was indirectly introduced at the Bar.

10 Judenfrei (Judenrein)

German for 'free (purified) of Jews'. A term created by the Nazis in Germany in connection with the plan entitled 'The Final Solution to the Jewish Question', the aim of which was defined as 'the creation of a Europe free of Jews'. The term 'Judenrein'/'Judenfrei' in Nazi terminology referred to the extermination of the Jews and described an area (a town or a region), from which the entire Jewish population had been deported to extermination camps or forced labor camps. The term was, particularly in occupied Poland, an established part of the official and unofficial Nazi language.

11 The killings of Jewish students in Lwow in 1938-1939

The "desk-ghetto" was introduced at Lwow University in 1937. Jewish students refused to observe it and some of the Polish students supported them. Nationalist squads tried to impose the ghetto by force: they coerced Jews to occupy specified seats. On 24th October 1938 the Jewish students of the Department of Pharmacology were attacked with knives. Two of them-Karol Zeller Mayer and Samuel Proweller-died as a result of wounds. Police investigation demonstrated that the perpetrators were members of a squad belonging to the National Democratic Party; some of them were arrested. Zeller Mayer's funeral turned into a demonstration against violence at the university, attended by Jews, members of various organizations, students and part of the faculty, including the rector. On 24th May 1939 another Jewish student was killed during riots, Markus Landsberg. He was a first-year student at the Lwow Polytechnic. The Senate at the Polytechnic demanded that student organizations condemn that crime. 18 refused. 16 professors wrote a memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding steps to be taken in order to curb the destructive elements among the students.

12 Annexation of Eastern Poland

According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact defining Soviet and German territorial spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland in September 1939. In early November the newly annexed lands were divided up between the Ukrainian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics.

13 Mickiewicz, Adam (1798-1855)

Often regarded as the greatest Polish poet. As a student he was arrested for nationalist activities by the tsarist police in 1823. In 1829 he managed to emigrate to France and worked as professor of literature at different universities. During the 1848 revolution in France and the Crimean War he attempted to organize legions for the Polish cause. Mickiewicz's poetry gave international stature to Polish literature. His powerful verse expressed a romantic view of the soul and the mysteries of life, often employing Polish folk themes.

14 Soviet capture of Lwow

From 12th September 1939, Lwow was surrounded by the German army. General Wladyslaw Langner was in command of the defense. On 19th September the Soviet troops attacked from the east. The Germans began evacuation, as in line with the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact Lwow was to belong to the Soviet occupational zone. The representatives of the Red Army began talks with the city authorities. On 21st September a tentative capitulation agreement was reached. On 22nd September around 1pm the Soviet army entered Lwow. The taking of the city was relatively nonviolent. Polish soldiers lay down their arms. Several lynchings happened, the victims were particularly Polish policemen. In the poverty-stricken districts and among the Jews and Ukrainians demonstrations were organized in support of the new authorities.

15 Lwow deportations

From the beginning of the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland on 17th September 1939, until the Soviet - German war, which broke out on 21st June 1941, the Soviet authorities were deporting people associated with the former Polish authorities, culture, church and army. Around 400,000 people were exiled from the Lwow, Tarnopol and Stanislawow districts, mostly to northern Russia, Siberia and Kazakhstan. Between 12th and 15th April as many as 25,000 were deported from Lwow only.

16 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.

17 Belzec

Village in Lublin region of Poland (Tomaszow district). In 1940 the Germans created a forced labor camp there for 2,500 Jews and Roma. In November 1941 it was transformed into an extermination camp (SS Sonderkommando Belzec or Dienststelle Belzec der Waffen SS) under the 'Reinhard-Aktion,' in which the Germans murdered around 600,000 people (chiefly in gas chambers), including approximately 550,000 Polish Jews (approx. 300,000 from the province of Galicia) and Jews from the USSR, Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Holland, Germany, Norway and Hungary; many Poles from surrounding towns and villages and from Lwow also died here, mostly for helping Jews. In November 1942 the Nazis began liquidating the camp. In the spring of 1943 the camp was demolished and the corpses of the gassed victims exhumed from their mass graves and burned. The last 600 Jews employed in this work were then sent to the Sobibor camp, where they died in the gas chambers.

18 Szmalcownik

Polish slang word from the period of the German occupation (derived from the German word 'Schmalz', meaning lard), referring to a person blackmailing and denouncing Jews in hiding. Szmalcowniks operated in all larger cities, in particular following the liquidation of the ghettos, when Jews who had evaded deportation attempted to survive in hiding. In Warsaw they often formed organized groups that prowled around the ghetto exists. They picked out their victims by subtle signs (e.g. lowered, frightened eyes, timid behavior), eccentric clothing (e.g. the lack of the fur collar so widespread at the time, or wearing winter clothes in summer), way of speaking, etc. Victims so selected were threatened with denunciation to the Germans; blackmail could be an isolated event or be repeated until the victim's financial resources ran out. The Polish underground attempted to combat the szmalcowniks but in vain. To this day the crimes of the szmalcowniks are not entirely investigated and accounted for.

19 Kenkarta

(German: Kennkarte - ID card) confirmed the identity and place of residence of its holder. It bore a photograph, a thumbprint, and the address and signature of its holder. It was the only document of its type issued to Poles during the Nazi occupation.

20 Strykowski, Julian (1905-1996)

real name Pesach Stark. Writer, born into an Orthodox Jewish family. In his youth he participated in the Zionist movement, later associated with the communist left. He lived through the war in the USSR. In his writing he gives an epic-scale depiction of small-town Jewish communities in Poland before WWI. His best known novels are: 'Glosy w ciemnosci' (1956), Austeria [The Inn, 1966] and 'Sen Azrila' (1975). He wrote a triptych of novels based on biblical themes: Odpowiedz (1982), Krol Dawid zyje! (1984), Juda Makabi (1986). He deals with the communist period in his life in the novel 'Czarna Roza' (1962, published underground) and in his memoirs, 'To samo, ale inaczej' (1990). His historical novel dealing with 15th century Spanish inquisition, 'Przybysz z Narbony' (1978), is also well-known.

21 Repatriations

Post-war repatriations from the USSR included displaced persons deported to the Soviet Union during the war, but also native inhabitants of what had been eastern Poland before the war and what was annexed to the Soviet Union in 1945. In the years 1945-1950, 266,000 people were repatriated, among them around 150,000 Jews. The name 'repatriation' is commonly used, despite the fact that those were often not voluntary.

22 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.

23 Jewish Historical Institute [Zydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH)]

Warsaw-based academic institution devoted to researching the history and culture of Polish Jews. Founded in 1947 from the Central Jewish Historical Committee, an arm of the Central Committee for Polish Jews. ZIH houses an archive center and library whose stocks include the books salvaged

from the libraries of the Templum Synagogue and the Institute of Judaistica, and the documents comprising the Ringelblum Archive. ZIH also has exhibition rooms where its collection of liturgical items and Jewish painting are on display, and an exhibition dedicated to the Warsaw ghetto. Initially the institute devoted its research activities solely to the Holocaust, but over the last dozen or so years it has broadened the scope of its historical and cultural work. In 1993 ZIH was brought under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. It publishes the Jewish Historical Institute Quarterly.