

# Krystyna Budnicka

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Krystyna Budnicka, formerly called Hena Kuczer, is a retired teacher and tutor of handicapped children. Since the fall of communism she has been an active member of the Children of the Holocaust Organization. In 1939 she was just seven years old. She remembers many surprising details, less so the coherent whole thread of a story or event. She has lived in Warsaw all her life: on Muranowski Square in the Jewish district before the war, later in the ghetto and in hiding 'on the Aryan side', and after the war in a series of apartments. We had several talks, both in the headquarters of the Children of the Holocaust Organization in Warsaw's only surviving synagogue, and in her one-bedroom apartment in a tower block on the site of the former ghetto. Krystyna told me of the worlds to which she belongs and asserted that she is consistent in the choices she makes.



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## **My family background**

My name is Krystyna Budnicka, my true family name is Kuczer, Hena Kuczer. I first used my Polish name when Mr. Budnicki, a Pole, who had been looking after me, handed me over to some nuns who ran an orphanage as we were leaving a burning Warsaw after the Uprising [Warsaw Uprising] [1](#) in October 1944. When the nuns asked my name I didn't hesitate for long. Krystyna Budnicka, I said. And it stuck.

I was born in 1932, on 8th May, in Warsaw and lived in Warsaw at 10, Muranowski Square. My father was a carpenter. I was the eighth and last child in my family; I had six brothers and one sister. When I was born, you could say my parents were of advanced age - I was 21 years younger than my eldest brother. Five of my brothers were already completely grown-up, while one of them was only a year and a half older than me. The eldest was Izaak, we called him Icie, and later came Boruch and Szaja - familiarly they called him Sewek. Then there was Rafal, his full name in Yiddish must have been Ruben, Ruwen, Riwen or something like that. The fifth was Chaim, and the youngest Jidl, or Jehuda. My sister's name was Perla; she was older than Chaim.

My father, Jozef Lejzor Kuczer, was born in Siemiatycze [a town not far from Bialystok, eastern Poland], probably some time around 1880. That's how I calculate it, anyway, because when he died in 1943 he was around 60 years old. He ran a woodworking shop, he did carpentry and also some construction work. In the workshop there was what we called a 'krajzega', that is a circular electric saw. The workshop was in the basement of the dwelling house in which we lived; we lived on the first floor above the workshop. Our family wasn't exactly rich, but we weren't particularly poor either.

My father's family came from Siemiatycze. When they moved to Warsaw I don't know. What I do know comes from a cousin who lives in Israel, whose mother was my father's sister. My grandfather's name was Abraham, he was a carpenter, too. I don't know anything else about him, except that he probably came from Siemiatycze, too. I have no idea when he was born or when he died. I learned that the maiden name of my grandmother on my father's side was Grinberg or Grynberg. Chaja Grynberg. My father's brother, Ber Kuczer, also lived in Warsaw. He was a journalist, wrote a newspaper column, texts for small variety houses. What exactly, I don't know. I met him after the war. He wrote a book in Yiddish entitled Once There Was Warsaw. Ber Kuczer and the cousin from Israel survived the war in Russia. Ber died in Israel.

There is nothing I can say about my mother's family, I know nothing about them. Perhaps my grandfather, my mother's father, lived with us - I remember an old man lived with us and I know that he died. I must have been very small then. I know that mother had some siblings but somehow I don't remember any of them, there was an aunt, but I know nothing of her. I know more about my dad's family thanks to the cousin from Israel - he used to visit us at home, he still remembers me as a small child. That's all I know about my family.

My mother's first name was Cyrla, and her maiden name was Bzura. I know that she married very young. She could have been born around 1890. I don't know where she was born. She must have come from a religious family - I remember that on Saturdays she wore a wig, and on ordinary days she went around in a hairnet. Father always had his head covered. He didn't have sidelocks - he was no Hasid [2](#), but he was a pious Jew, and he had a beard, a beautiful long silvery beard, which parted at the bottom. He didn't wear a hat but a kashket, a kind of a small cap with a peak. My father was some sort of elder at the synagogue.

Only one of my brothers, Boruch, was religious. He had a pious wife and he wore a kashket too. Boruch was a carpenter, like father. He lived on Twarda Street. I guess he was born in 1913 or 1914. Boruch already had two children before the war. I think the name of his son was Abram, Abramek. Also this I remember very vaguely. And his little girl's name was Dobrusia, or Towa.

My eldest brother, Icie [his official name was Izaak] rented a studio flat on Miedziana Street and had a reading room. I used to go to his place. I remember he had a funny washstand. It was concealed, in a kind of small cabinet, and on top of it there was something that looked like a shelf with books. When you opened the cabinet, there was a washbasin inside. Icie passed his high school finals before the war. As I calculate it, he was born in 1911. Uncle Ber helped my brother set up his reading room. It was the Jewish reading room called Parnas on Nowolipie Street. When the war started, Icie brought the book collection to our house and deposited it in our basement, where the workshop was located. I learned to read from that book collection myself. At that time I didn't go to school, and I recall reading in Polish: Little Jack's Bankruptcy [by Janusz Korczak] [3](#), The Heart

of a Boy by Amicis, Korczak's King Matt the First. [These were all popular children's books]. So there must have been Polish books, too. I don't think I could read in Yiddish, although I'm sure I could speak it. Today I don't even recognize the letters, I know what the alef looks like and nothing more. I'm very ashamed of this, since I could have found the time to get interested in it somehow, but as in many matters I frequently tell myself, 'Oh well, it's not worth it'.

I remember Icie had such a beautiful tan - he used to spend time in Zakopane, in Sopot [Polish mountain and sea resorts], he was like a bit of a stray from the rest of the family. He wore bright clothes. He was certainly Mother's favorite. More of a dainty, compared to, for example, Rafal who was brawny, strong, made for physical labor. Icie was cut out for books.

The third one, Szaja, was into communism. He also married before the war, they didn't have any children. I remember Szaja's wedding. The year might have been 1938 or 1937. I remember how I was dressed. I wore a red bow in my hair and a plush maroon velour dress that had been taken out. And I also recall that it must have been May or June. That wedding took place in our home. I don't know what business Szaja was in. Religious he certainly wasn't. My cousin from Israel, Szymon, says that Szaja belonged to some party. I don't know where he lived.

Perla had been the only daughter for a long time. She was slightly-built, slender and had curly hair. She was a great help to my mother. I don't remember which school she went to, but I know that she attended a corset-making course, which was the reason why a Singer sewing-machine arrived in our home. That Singer machine later came to play quite an important role, for it was sold for two buns in the ghetto. Perla was probably younger than Rafal, perhaps 20 in 1939, and Rafal maybe 24. She didn't get married, much to my mother's chagrin, as Perla was already considered a spinster. Perhaps it runs in our family! [Krystyna has never married.] There was talk of match-makers, but I don't remember much. I remember that Perla once took me to some Zionist meeting. Because I recall a song in Polish that went, 'We Jewess-patriots have paws like pussy-cats...' and more about us having something to do with the Arabs.

For me, Rafal was the most important one. Later on, in the ghetto, when we were living in the bunker, he was our leader, and gave us a sense of security. He was our 'captain' - we even called him that. And when everyone else had gone, Rafal was all I had left. He was the last one. As far as I remember, Rafal graduated from a technical school - either Wawelberg's or Konarski's. He worked in the shop along with my father. I remember that once they made a crate at our shop, I don't know whether it was for flour or something else, for Dr Korczak, for his orphans. Rafal wasn't religious. It must have pained my mother very much that her children weren't religious. Rafal was still living at home. He got married in the ghetto.

Chaim was much younger, he had to be much younger than either Rafal or Perla. He was some ten years older than Jidl. I know that Jidl was born in 1931 and Chaim in 1920 or 1921. He finished some school and worked with my father as well. Jidl was a year and half older than me. We hung out, fought, and played together. He was very attached to his brothers, followed them everywhere like a little puppy.

## Growing up

Very early, perhaps at the age of three, I was sent to freblowka [kindergarten] on Sierakowska Street, near Traugutt Park. That street is no more. In the morning, a child caretaker would make

the rounds to take children to the kindergarten. I stayed there until I was six, when I started school. The school was located on Barokowa Street, next to Krasinski Park, and it was a Jewish school with instruction in Polish. There was a religious studies class, and I remember a gentleman who was probably grade tutor and wore a smock frock and oversleeves; he must have taught all the subjects. I remember a handbook for the religious studies class, it was called Little Biblical History. I don't recall whether only girls or both girls and boys studied at this school. I was there for just one school year.

The house in which I lived was five floors high. It was the house on the corner of Muranowski Square and Sierakowska Street, and it had two staircases, five floors, and on each floor two families. Only Jews lived in our house, only the caretaker, a woman, wasn't Jewish. My mother once sent me to the caretaker to pick up the key to the attic. She told me not to look around at the walls, that it was forbidden to look at them. 'Remember: take the key and leave,' she said. But I did look around. I think there was probably a cross hanging on the wall. I remember the feeling of guilt, of sin: I wanted to see what it was that I wasn't allowed to look at. Adjacent [to Krystyna's house] was a restaurant, run by a Pole, his name was Gojski. I remember that he had a very good-looking son, older than me. At the corner of Sierakowska and Muranowski Square there was a shop in which I bought chocolate-covered khalva [syrupy walnut dessert] for 5 groszy.

We had two rooms on the first floor. I think that it had originally been just one large room, divided in time in two, and there was a fairly big kitchen. There was a toilet, and just before the war even a bathroom was put in, with a bathtub. I still recall bathing in the washtub after a grand laundry wash. The washtub was usually stored in the cellar, but once it had been brought in, we had such solemn ablutions. Well, usually we washed in bowls. And there was hot water, there was a boiler above the kitchen stove; it was a coal stove, with a sort of coil pipe that served to heat water. The bathroom was built by Rafal.

The entrance to the kitchen was directly from the corridor, there was no hall at all. In the kitchen, on the right hand side, there was a sink; we children constantly had to wash our hands in the sink. There were no double washbasins or bowls for washing the dishes - those I don't recall, but I do remember koshering dishes before Passover. That was done in the courtyard: My mother put the dishes into a large vat of hot water and then put in a sizzling flat iron heater, fiery-red, and the water swirled, swirled, and then it was all ready. In the kitchen there was a large cupboard and a table where we ate every day, since the entire family didn't really sit down for a common meal on ordinary days, there was no time for that. In the cellar my mother kept some stocked provisions: cabbage or potatoes for the winter.

My parents' bedroom was a small room with two traditional old-fashioned beds pushed together. We gathered the bedding from the entire apartment, placed it on those beds and covered it with bedspreads. And a grand cupboard stood there; it was probably made of oak, massive-looking, with drawers. The wardrobe stood in the first room. Also in this room was a large folding table - solemn Sabbath suppers and everything else took place there. Then there were also window shutters, for we were on the first floor. They were locked with a sort of bolt from the outside. In the first room, the dining room, the walls were painted navy blue with patterns, which to me seemed like macabre scenes, as I slept in that room. An iron bed stood in the kitchen, on which my two youngest brothers slept.

Everyday food was simple. How much food my poor mother had to prepare for so many people! Soups were rather simple. I remember cabbage soup since I didn't like it, and it had to be strained because it contained 'tatters'. I remember the borsht, and a dish in aspic, called 'cold feet', made from beef, that I didn't like. For breakfast we got some kind of milk soup, I liked very much, stale challah soaked in milk. Even now I prepare such pap for myself. My mother baked challot and cakes. She didn't make braids on the challah, she just folded it in two. I recall cheesecake and drozdowe [yeast-based sweet bread] with crumble. My mother's specialty was raisin wine. I remember that there was always a demijohn of fermenting wine on the windowsill. I remember that during the occupation kosher food was hard to get, and my mother agonized over breaking the precepts. At the beginning she wouldn't take anything treyf into her mouth.

The solemn supper was on Fridays and Saturdays, when we ate together in the dining room, on a white table cloth. I remember that on Fridays my mother served hot fish with challah. And we dipped the challah into a warm sauce. Chicken soup was mandatory. And I remember cholent being carried to a bakery at Sierakowska Street. The pot was wrapped with paper, with our surname on it. The caretaker usually came to turn off the lights, until my brother Rafal designed a switch that he could set for a specific time. I remember the gray hours on Saturdays, when it wasn't yet permitted to turn the lights on, even though it was already twilight. We would sit by the tiled heating stove, and my mother told us fairy tales. Or my father would tell us biblical stories. He certainly talked to us in Yiddish. He couldn't have been telling his children about the Bible in Polish, could he? And my mother's fairy tales were probably told in Yiddish, too, although I can't say for sure. When I hear Yiddish spoken today I understand a little of what is being talked about. At home, there was a plywood board with the Hebrew alphabet on it, and my mother used to teach a little of it to me. I also remember some Yiddish songs.

My father treated my mother as if she were a queen. I never heard him raise his voice. We used to address her, 'Would Mother be so kind and...' I used to say, 'Would Mother be so kind and give me something or do something for me?' There was an incredible respect for her. Cyrle, Cyrle - that is how my father addressed my mother. I recall that good atmosphere. For others, my father must have been a figure of authority. They came to ask for his advice. I know that he used to do the cupping on people. They turned to him in all kinds of matters.

I haven't mentioned yet that we had a telephone, which is very important - at that time a telephone was a rarity. I remember a lawyer, a Jew from the neighborhood, who came to us to make calls. From a pre-war phone book I learned that the telephone had been registered in the name of my brother Boruch. It used to hang over a side table in the small room.

I had definitely been in some kind of synagogue before the war. But I think it was probably a small prayer house, not a big synagogue. That's all I remember, though. I recall Chanukkah: candle holders stood on the windowsill. I don't remember any gifts, [though] I know that today children get gifts. I remember Pesach, the moment that the door opened for Elijah to enter. I know that I knew the questions [the ma nishtanah] that had to be asked during the seder. At Pesach we used to eat macebrajka [pron. 'matzebrayka'] - crushed matzah crumbled into beaten egg, seasoned with a little salt and pepper and fried, a kind of matzah omelette. My mother used to fry it in goose fat; these days I fry macebrajka in margarine. I remember the Purim rattles that my father made for the younger children. And I remember the beautiful window decorations in the Jewish shops for Purim. Everybody would gather in our flat on Muranowska Street for the festivals. There were so



many of us that we children had a table to ourselves.

I had a lot of toys made from wood by my father. I had beautiful toy furniture. And a kind of rag doll which my sister had sewed for me - you would buy a celluloid head, sew a small sack and fill it up with sawdust. And there was plenty of sawdust in the house. Then you would stitch to it little legs and arms, and you had a beautiful doll. I didn't have a bicycle, such things I didn't have at all. In the courtyard, boys would go about with a sort of little wheel guided by a poker. I remember one girlfriend - Roza from Muranowski Square. Her parents owned a button factory. I used to visit her and we played and I must have been jealous of her, she was just my girlfriend. Once her mom treated me to a fruit jelly - never before had I eaten jelly. Roza would come out to the courtyard and we played hopscotch, tag and skipped rope. My strongest memory of the courtyard is from 1940. Isolation [the isolation of Jews] [4](#) had already been brought in, and our parents forbade us to go out into the street, though the ghetto had not yet been created.

A tram passed under my window, but before the war I never rode on a tram, although I did drive in a hackney carriage. When I broke my leg, my father took me to hospital for an x-ray in a hackney carriage. Later I lay at home with my leg in traction. I also rode on a [horse-driven] cart to a summer vacation spot. That was somewhere on the Otwock line. Father rented two small rooms in a little wooden house with a veranda, and a small kitchen. My mother would take the younger children with her, and my father and my elder brothers came on Fridays. The cart was used for transporting the bedding and pots. The veranda was where we would relax and take our meals. That lasted until September. I remember a conversation between my parents. They were pondering whether there was enough money for the summer holiday. Mother put the matter squarely, 'All right then, I can spend the entire summer in Warsaw, but just count: for summer in Warsaw I need a hat, new stockings and a dress, otherwise how can I go out?! And once I rode on a train with my father, but I don't recall where to.

## During the war

I can't say whether we shortened our vacation in 1939, I know that there was a [pre-]war atmosphere: stocking up on provisions, buying in supplies for the medicine chest, filling crates with sand, buying gas masks (make-believe masks, tampons to be soaked in something). From the first period [of the war] I remember that we would sit in the cellar when there was an air raid. We listened to the radio. The entire family would sit in that workshop of our father's. I remember refugees, Jews from Germany, arriving in Warsaw. I'm a very poor witness for all that because I never went out. Before the ghetto [the Warsaw Ghetto] [5](#), I was a little child, staying with my parents. In the ghetto I hardly ever got out, since at the beginning I was still a small child and then I was in hiding; neither did I see the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising [6](#) with my own eyes, and when I was on the Aryan side I didn't go out on the street.

I remember a house search in our apartment. They cut open a small sack of flour with a bayonet. Under the small table in my parents' bedroom there was a trapdoor to the basement. The men were hiding because then they were only looking for men. And in the cellar there was another hiding place in a crate with sawdust. Before the ghetto, at the beginning, after the September bombings, Father still had a lot of work. Later it got worse. Rafal got married when we were already in the ghetto. He and Fela went to live one floor above us at Muranowski Square. Fela was killed during the Great Action [7](#). Icie also came back home when the ghetto was already in place. And he

brought the book collection from his reading room to our cellar. In July 1942 we were already living on Mila Street. [The area of the ghetto was reduced in size a number of times. On June 26th 1942, Sierakowska Street was excluded from the ghetto.] The flat on Mila Street was empty, simply it was already empty. A room with a kitchen, on an upper floor. At that time we had already lost contact with Boruch and his family.

In 1942, during the Great Action, Boruch had said, 'Little children, where can I hide with such small children? A child will cry, we have nothing to eat.' So it was sort of his own decision, I don't mean that he went voluntarily, but... he didn't fight. It is likely that they were killed during the Great Action. Szaja and his wife were caught during the Great Action, too. They went to Treblinka. And Rafal and his wife were caught. Rafal escaped from the train while being transported to Treblinka, but his wife didn't manage.

We had a hiding place at Mila, too, it was located in the ventilation chimney. We survived several house searches inside that chimney. A type of disguised cabinet on rollers was used to cover the entry to the chimney. During the Great Action we hid there several times. Jewish policemen were given quotas, they had to catch a certain number of people and deliver them to the Umschlagplatz. [Editor's note: The place in the Warsaw Ghetto from which deportations left to extermination camps.] They yelled from the courtyard that they were waiting, that everyone had to come down with provisions for one day and clothes, and that they would be going on a trip. So, after such an announcement, there was a moment of silence, and later a house search would begin in the apartments. There was a padlock hanging outside our door, and it looked like the flat had been closed from the outside. But they would force the padlock open, enter and search. Well, somehow they were never able to find us. I remember the illness of my brother and the illness of my father, it must have been typhoid fever. And I remember that we were very short of food. My mother sold a ring and the Singer sewing machine, and for them she got two white buns for my father. I remember the terrible fear in that chimney, when your heart is pounding because you can hear loud steps and you know that at any moment they could catch and kill you. I remember feeling hungry later, in the bunker. [Editor's note: Krystyna was in hiding in a bunker built by her brothers from February to September 1943.] I remember how I imagined that I was eating, that I was chewing bread. But I remember my fear better than the hunger.

After the Great Action we remained in hiding, no-one from our family worked legally in the shop. [Only those who worked in the ghetto factories had the right to live there, others were so called 'dzicy', 'wild' inhabitants of the ghetto.] Rafal, Icie and Chaim, my brothers, were building a bunker. Rafal was the boss in this business. I don't know where they had found the people who gave the money for the construction of the bunker. I think that they began building it right after the Great Action. The bunker was on Zamenhofa Street. We moved into the bunker in January 1943, I think. We had stocks of provisions. I know that there was a physician among us. At the beginning, until the uprising, there were some 30, 35 to 40 people. From this bunker there was a passage into the sewers, and that was the crucial thing, that made it possible [for us] to cross over to the Aryan side. Between January and April, the boys, my brothers, would go into the sewer to explore the Aryan side.

I will now describe the bunker. The passage down from the basement was closed off by a trapdoor that weighed 70 kilo. The bunker was constructed in such a way that the whole was dug out below cellar level, and the soil that was taken out was used to strengthen the ceiling with the help of

wood planks and logs. Inside there were two rooms: in one, provisions and other necessities of life were kept. From that pit a tunnel was built leading to the sewer. The tunnel might have been ten meters long or perhaps even more. That tunnel, which was hollowed out in such a way, was the second room, the bunks were there. That was the place where we lived. And when the ghetto started burning, then it was literally like in an oven there. [Editor's note: The Germans began to burn down houses in the ghetto a few days after the liquidation began on 19th April 1943. Street after street burned. By 15th May, when the final liquidation of the ghetto was announced, most of the buildings in it had been burned down.] We would escape to the sewer to cool off a bit. The bunker was designed to be very safe. Inside we had everything: light, water. We also had a radio in the bunker. The idea was that we would survive the war in it.

Every day Icie made notes on our life in the bunker; but all of that was destroyed there, nothing was saved. It was in the bunker, before the Uprising, that the marriage of Icie and Anka took place. My father led the ceremony. At that time he didn't wear a beard anymore because the Germans had cut his beard in 1939, as soon as they came in they cut off half of his beard. I was very sick once and was given one potato, which my mother mashed and then fed me. I probably had a high fever, I don't know what the matter with me was, but I got well later on. My parents were very weak, they were simply wasting away. We switched day for night. During the day we slept.

There were food rations allotted in a way to make it fair. There was this watery soup made of oats. In the bunker meals were cooked on an electric range. We relieved ourselves into a small pail and then dropped the contents into the sewer. We washed one after another in a bowl. Emissaries were sent outside. But I really remember very little. I think the most important thing was not to move around too much, and that was all. And I suppose I just learnt to live like that. I was very young and didn't want to cause trouble or bring danger on us, so I breathed quietly. I really don't recall very much at all. I never went out at all, not even at night. None of us went out. If there was any danger we would hide in the sewers. I remember going out onto the street only once, during the day, but that was before the Uprising. We went to another cellar, but I don't know why, and I remember that we returned to our bunker very shortly after that.

The people in the bunker - I don't know who they were or how they came to be there. I know that we had no money, so perhaps my brothers constructed the bunker and the other people supplied them with food and medicine. I remember a physician and his wife, a married couple with two daughters and a son, the latter left earlier and helped us after that. And there were many people, but they didn't get fixed in my memory as they were only there for a short time, and they left quickly. I don't know what happened to them. They all tried to pass onto the Polish side via the sewers. The Germans knew that people were escaping through these sewers and dropped gas and grenades into them. At one point, the cellar collapsed with all the stocks of provisions inside, and we were left with literally two sacks of oats. We were left without light, nothing, not even water. And the boys started to dig through this mass of earth in order to somehow get to the air. They bored these passages in wet rags, and finally they reached some adjacent cellar, for there was a whole chain of cellars. I didn't see any firearms on my brothers, perhaps they didn't have any in the bunker, but I know they were in the Uprising, at the beginning, maybe for several days. They said they had come back from the Uprising. And when everything was coming down, burning, they were with us.



When they tracked us down, it was already September 1943. Two girls from the bunker came into contact with the caretaker of a house somewhere on Okopowa Street; Wasilewski his name was. He later helped us. He cleaned around the manhole, and he would hand us slips of paper with information, and we would pass ours to him. One day a man came to us from the outside, carrying a backpack with food, I don't know who he was. He was a very nice young man. And he said, 'Don't worry, everything will be okay, we will take you away from here.' At that time there were thirteen of us: My mother, my father, four of my brothers - Icie, Chaim, Rafal and Jidl - I, Perla, Anka - Icie's wife - and two married couples. Then the disaster happened. My poor brother Rafal got sick - it was dysentery or perhaps typhoid. A message was sent out immediately through Wasilewski and they took him above the ground.

Chaim and Icie, along with the husband of one of the women, took responsibility now. They began to go out, up through the sewers, and once they chanced upon two Polish looters. They agreed to meet them the next day. They put us in a sewer and came out to meet the men in the hope that they would bring us perhaps bread or something. As we were sitting in the sewer, we only heard shots and incredible shouting. We just sat there on some planks and waited for hours. After several hours my sister and Anka went inside the bunker, where they found nobody, they didn't go outside. My little brother, Jidl, knew which way to go in the sewer, took a flash-light from the bunker, and led us to the manhole that served as a contact point. After several hours we gave a slip of paper to the caretaker, 'Save us, the bunker has been compromised, we are sitting in the sewer.' They [the Poles] replied that they could come the next night.

And they came. When they came, it turned out that the manhole had been soldered up and that they couldn't open it. And we had to go to another manhole. But that was hardly possible, for we simply didn't have any strength to go. It was quite a distance and ahead of us there was a sewer with a very strong current. So my mother stayed behind. She wasn't able to get up from the mud. My father didn't have the strength, either, nor did the other woman, as she had one leg in plaster. My sister Perla said that she wouldn't go, she wouldn't leave them, and she stayed with them. I also wanted to stay, but my mother said, 'No, you go, Rafal is there, so you will tell him about us and he will come to help us. Go!' And they remained there. Well, and then we nearly drowned. My little brother went first and he was carried away by a wave, his torch-light went out, and we stopped, we had no idea what to do... there was darkness, water, a terrible whirl. Then the torch-light lights up from a distance and he cries, 'Anka, I'm alive!' Jidl went up under the manhole while we stayed behind, and he told the rescuers that we were waiting there but wouldn't manage on our own.

They carried the three of us out probably at Okopowa Street, where there was a candle factory. I know that Polish policemen [the so-called 'policja granatowa'] were among those securing our rescue. They took us to that Wasilewski. Then they washed us somehow. I was almost unconscious. I remember that I saw Rafal, and he asked me where our parents were, and I said that they had stayed behind and were waiting for help. Rafal pleaded with the people and they promised to return there the next night. There was contact with my parents through the manhole; I know that Valeriana drops were passed to them. But later the contact came to an end. Later it became dangerous there, even though Mr. Wasilewski was a decent man. They packed us, Rafal, Anka, Jidl and me, into four sacks, the kind with a small opening. After so many years, I finally saw that there was a world out there.

We were all barely alive, didn't look like human beings. They drove us to 1, Mokotowska Street. The house had probably been destroyed in 1939, and only the cellars remained in very good condition. It was a corner house with windows on one side overlooking Polna Street. Only four of us stayed there, but that was only for a very short while, for Jidl fell sick after the journey through the sewers and died. A physician came to see us, probably a Jew, he set our diet. And there was a house caretaker who looked after us. His name was Grochowski. And unfortunately there was the caretaker's son, who later contributed to Rafal's death, he simply denounced him. We revived; put a bit of weight back on. After the death of my brother Jidl there were only three of us. Rafal buried him secretly, probably somewhere in the courtyard. It was October 1943. We began to receive assistance. A woman called Basia brought us various things and money. I think it could have been Basia Bermanowa [a liaison of the Jewish National Committee] [8](#).

Later came an order, I don't know from whom, that since my brother was skilled in building bunkers, the cellar should be used for that purpose. And then, I believe in December, a man called Antek came to us and brought my brother firearms. [The interviewee is probably referring to Antek Zuckerman, one of the leaders of ZOB] [9](#). The construction started. That tunnel was to lead to the closest sewer. First the descent into the tunnel was built, so we had a place to hide in an emergency. We were there when the trouble with Mr. Grochowski's son, his name was Kazik, started. He was a young man, rather unimpressive, used to drink a bit, maybe he wanted to blackmail us. He, or so we thought, brought the Germans. We then hid quickly in the shelter, and spent the entire night there. They put seals on the cellars from the outside and we couldn't get out at all. Fortunately, Rafal's colleague from the underground organization was there with us, he got out through some little window and later got us out as well. One night we walked from 1, Mokotowska Street to Podwale Street.

Ms. Stefania Socha lived at 15, or 17, Podwale Street, in a studio flat on the first floor, and she took us in. She was a kind of patriotic drunk who kissed every metal badge with the Polish eagle [the national emblem]. Naturally, she knew that we were Jewish, that couldn't be disguised - we looked ghastly. At her place, we slept on the floor. We only spent a few days there, maybe a week. We were visited by the same man who used to come to the ghetto, he was a liaison man. He always bragged that nothing could happen to him because he had cyanide. Finally, the boys decided that the Germans were no longer watching the house at 1, Mokotowska Street, and that we should go back there since it would be a pity to waste the effort they had put into the building of the tunnel. It was agreed that Rafal should go back alone, without Anka and myself. A 17-year-old boy, Zygmunt, was to go with Rafal to help him. Us they moved to Dolna Street to a woman called Ms. Zakrzewska or Zarzycka, I'm not sure, who was a midwife. It was January 1944. And they took Rafal to the place on Mokotowska Street. Ms. Zakrzewska was being given some money and she fed us. She lived with her husband and a small daughter. Whenever anyone came in, we hid behind a curtain.

January passed and we had no news about Rafal. In February no money came. The lady kept feeding us, but it was getting more and more difficult. We learned in the end that Rafal was dead. He got into a quarrel with Kazik, the caretaker's son, because Kazik was careless in his work, and Kazik brought in the Germans. The boy who had been assisting him, Zygmunt, was also killed. The money for our upkeep began to flow in again. It was brought by someone else, for Jozek, the liaison, had also been killed. I don't know exactly where the money came from but I guess it was from the Jewish National Committee. We lived there undisturbed through February, March and April

[1944]. One day it turned out that the midwife had been doing illegal abortions and injured some Volksdeutsche [10](#) woman who ended up in hospital and the Germans began an investigation: where, what and how. We had to run. Anka and I were led out separately, but on Dolna Street some kids began to yell after me, 'Jewess'. I spent the entire night on coal in a cellar. I was not suitable to be shown to other people. I couldn't show my face in public because I looked very Semitic. [Jews identified as such by Poles were often blackmailed or handed over to the Germans.] The next day a female liaison came in the morning, put a bandage around my head and took me by tram to Dobra Street. And that's how I found myself at the Budnickis'. Anka was already there.

The Budnickis helped Jews; they were a middle-aged childless couple. I know that when the summer holidays started, Mrs. Budnicka went to a summer vacation spot with some Jewish children, somewhere in the Otwock area. When the Uprising broke out, she wasn't in Dobra Street. Anka cooked there. I recall that the Poles captured a heating plant somewhere nearby and there was great joy, euphoria. During the Uprising we would go down with everybody else to the cellar, the shelter. At that time I didn't hear a bad word directed at us. You could say that people felt a stronger solidarity with one another, all felt the same danger. We walked out of Warsaw on 6th September with the Budnickis. We crossed Warsaw, which was ablaze. I parted with Anka in Wola [a district of Warsaw]. First, there was a night stopover under the open sky, and in the morning selection for work duties.

Mr. Budnicki noticed some nuns, Grey Nuns from Warsaw, from Ordynacka Street. He went up to the Mother Superior and told her that he had an orphan, that he wasn't her father. She said, 'You will come to get her after the war?' 'Yes, yes, of course,' said Budnicki. When the nun saw me, she asked, 'My child, what's your name?' I said, 'Krysia Budnicka'. I went with the children from the orphanage to the Pruszkow transit camp [11](#). Later it turned out that out of eighteen children, six were Jewish. One girlfriend lives in Warsaw, she is well-educated but doesn't maintain any contact with children of the Holocaust; she doesn't want to. She doesn't even want to stay in touch with me, even though we used to like each other very much.

At Pruszkow we spent only one night. I remember I was given an empty food can, with which I went to get soup. From Pruszkow the whole children's home was moved to Bobrowce near Mszczonow. The trek took several days. We were billeted in a school. A few of the girls were Jewish, but of course I knew nothing of that. We were all very poor, we had left Warsaw after the Uprising with nothing. The nuns scoured the villages and brought us bits of food and old clothes. I got a moth-eaten coat, I remember that was a luxury; the other children envied me. My looks were a big problem and the nuns protected me. When the other children went into the village to dig potatoes, the nuns kept me back. They told the other children that I had a wounded finger. I don't think I was very popular. Nobody taunted me for being Jewish, but the other children used to call me a creep because I was very obliging - probably because after the hell I'd been through I wanted to show my gratitude for being taken care of. We were in Bobrowce when the liberation came [the Russians entered Warsaw on 17th January 1945], and in February we were moved to Osuchow, to the abandoned palace of the Plater family. There I started going to school. I was 13. In May 1945 we were taken to a village called Szczaki Zlotoklos, where we continued to go to school.

The nuns wanted to baptize me right away, in October 1944, but a priest said that he couldn't approve, that baptism could take place only in the event of a life-threatening emergency. 'We shall wait, the war will end soon, she is a big girl and she must decide for herself,' he said. I was

baptized in Szczaki Zlotoklos. That was something I really wanted. I was very keen to fulfill all my religious duties conscientiously. Some men came to Szczaki Zlotoklos looking for Jewish children. The nuns brought them to me and I told them everything I remembered about my family. They said they would start looking, and that perhaps someone might have survived. I don't know what organization they can have been from. Six of us girls were Jewish. One was found by her father. I remember the tears. Another one was taken to Israel. She was very small, seven years old. First she was taken to the Jewish children's home, then to Cracow, and today she lives in Israel. They tried to persuade me to go as well, but I didn't want to, and I was old enough that they could hardly have forced me. The same people came to the children's home several times, and they carried on coming when we were back in Warsaw, too. [Editor's note: The children's home returned to Warsaw in 1946, and was located on Czerniakowska Street.] Once a man came to visit me claiming to be my cousin and telling me he was going to take me to Palestine. But I knew he was no relative of mine. I was very hurt that he tried to deceive me.

### Post-war

I stayed with the Grey Nuns for a very long time, up to my grammar school graduation, that is, until 1952. I finished elementary school in 1948 and had to choose a secondary school. I very much wanted to go to the grammar school run by the Nazarene Sisters, but the nuns said that I shouldn't, because I would be ruining my chances of a career. It was at the height of the Stalinist period and a church education was frowned upon. But I insisted. And the nuns were right - later on I had trouble getting a job. At school I was different, and didn't fit in. Not because I was Jewish, but because I was an orphan. The girls who went to that school were from well-off families. They brought white bread rolls with ham, while I had black bread and jam or dripping. I really never felt different because of my Jewishness. That was never an issue, it was something we never talked about - not because I concealed the fact, but because it just wasn't a topic that we discussed. In those days we didn't talk about the war at all. I know from conversations with Jewish friends of my age [today] that it was the same for them - nobody talked about the war. Nobody talked about themselves. If ever anyone asked me about my family I said that they had all died during the war. Perhaps not revealing anything afforded us some security?

In 1952 I went to Lublin Catholic University to study pedagogy. That was the very worst part of the Stalinist period, but the atmosphere there was fantastic. Many of us were escaping from communism and found our haven there. And not only that - it was the only time in my life that I felt on a par with my peers. I was just the same as they were - like them I was not with my family, like them I had no money, like them I lived for my studies, we were all young and in a similar situation. And I used to go back to the orphanage during vacations; I treated it like my only home. The nuns would mend the holes in my shoes and give me food to take back to Lublin with me. I was 20 years old, and I remember that there, at university, I was truly happy for the first time in my life. Everyone knew that I was Jewish, but it wasn't an issue. I think I was probably the only Jew at the whole university. I remember that once my friends came and told me that the young Father Daniel [Daniel Rufeisen] [12](#), a convert who was going to be a monk in Israel, had come to Lublin and was going to give a sermon. I didn't go; somehow it wasn't something I was interested in. I graduated after four years.

I've always remembered what home I came from, but I didn't want to be a Jew because I considered that it was something bad, for when one is a Jew, one suffers, loses one's family - that's

how I thought as a small girl and as a teenager. After the war my uncle Ber Kuczer came to see me and he wanted to take me away, but somehow he didn't insist too much. He was on his way from Russia to Paris. I didn't want to go. I couldn't make up my mind in a few seconds. I felt secure at the orphanage. I think I was afraid of more danger, more upheaval.

Later, I graduated from the Institute for Special Education in Warsaw. I wanted to get a job somewhere where I would be given lodgings. I applied to work in the militia-run emergency children's care unit but was turned down. I was also rejected by the Korczak Memorial Children's Home. Eventually I found a job in a children's sanatorium in Otwock, and I found a place to live in an attic an hour and a half's journey away - I was a squatter. I didn't get a flat of my own until 1967. There were a few people from Jewish families at the school in Otwock. The personnel officer was a Jew. Perhaps that's why I got the job. We got on well, but we didn't talk about the past. I became friendly with one of the teachers, and through her I met a family who I did talk to. That teacher and her family emigrated to Israel later. The fact that for many years I never talked about it, didn't want to think about it or remember, doesn't mean I stopped being a Jew. I was simply escaping from painful memories. And other people were doing the same. But we did keep in touch. I kept in touch with the girls from the orphanage all the time, but we didn't talk about the past.

In 1968 I got another job, but not because anyone forced me out - I simply found a better job, and one that was in Warsaw, so I didn't have to travel. And that year, in 1968, I made many trips to Gdanski Station [in Warsaw], which was where people left for Israel. I said goodbye to many people then, and cried. But I didn't have the feeling that it was anti-Semitism among the Poles that was driving them away. I blamed the communist system; after all, it was because of the authorities that these people were losing their jobs, it was communist agitators who were screaming at rallies for Jews to go to Zion. That system persecuted us in various ways, and anti-Semitism was just one of its methods.

Anti-Semitism in Poland. That's a very big, very complicated subject. In 1956 I personally didn't experience anything or see anti-Semitism directed towards others. I had just graduated. In the attic where I was squatting I had neither a radio nor a television. I wasn't living in a Jewish environment. And anyway, that wave of anti-Semitism wasn't as noticeable as the one in 1968. 1956 was mainly about purges among military personnel and people in power. And those were on the whole rather closed circles.

Anti-Semitism is either an illness or stupidity. The circles in which I move in Poland - doctors, teachers, the middle-class intelligentsia - have nothing to do with anti-Semitism. Either way, I don't believe that anti-Semitism in Poland is anything out of the ordinary. I don't imagine that anti-Semitism in France or America is any less painful. I think there has been a great improvement here in the last few years. Once the system changed, everything became more above-board and hence more normal.

And anti-Semitism within the Church? That saddens me greatly. But I believe that the Pope's teachings are being increasingly taken to heart. After all, after 2,000 years of anti-Semitism within the Church, it's not easy to change the Church in a very short time. But I believe it will change. I have a dilemma too, not a problem, because I don't find it a problem, but a dilemma, when people ask me to define who I am. Because I am a Jew - that is my nationality, my background, and a Christian - that is my religion - and a Pole - that is my culture. I can live with the problem of my



identity, it doesn't worry me. And other people needn't concern themselves with it.

I've never hidden the fact that I'm a Jew at all. Everyone knows who I am. I went to Israel for the first time in 1961. Everyone at work was astonished when I came back a few weeks later. I think they were sure I would stay there. But I didn't want to stay there. I've been to Israel twice, in 1961 and 1989. I love it very much, but I would never take the decision to move there because my roots are here. Israel is a very special place for me because it's a Jewish country, the cradle of both Judaism and Christianity. My country. Mine is the grave of Rachel and mine the grave of Christ. I'm no missionary, so for me Judaism and Christianity form a kind of whole. I'm very happy when I'm in Israel and I always want to return there. But my home is here, and it's here that I feel relatively secure. I'm alone here, because I have no family, but I'm not lonely. I don't think I would be happier anywhere else. Perhaps in Israel? If I had emigrated years ago.

I have been strongly involved with the Jewish community in Poland since 1990. I was the vice-chairperson of the Children of the Holocaust Organization for a few years. I'm very attached to the people there. And it makes me very happy to see young people in Poland rediscovering their Jewishness and returning to their long-lost roots. No, I don't feel any inner discord or conflict. And people here, my friends and acquaintances, understand me, I think. On Yom Kippur, a Sunday, I went to mass in the morning, and in the evening I lit a candle in the synagogue for my loved ones. I'm sure my mother understands me. From her perspective such earthly matters are simpler.

I've been a Catholic for a long time. A Catholic Jew. I am consistent in my choice. I come from a very religious family and religious faith is in my genes. Father Daniel Rufeisen very much wanted me to stay in Israel, in his Hebrew church.

## Glossary

### **1 Warsaw Uprising 1944**

The term refers to the Polish uprising between 1st August and 2nd October 1944, an armed uprising orchestrated by the underground Home Army and supported by the civilian population of Warsaw. It was justified by political motives: the calculation that if the domestic arm of the Polish government in exile took possession of the city, the USSR would be forced to recognize Polish sovereignty. The Allies rebuffed requests for support for the campaign. The Polish underground state failed to achieve its aim. Losses were vast: around 20,000 insurrectionists and 200,000 civilians were killed and 70% of the city destroyed.

### **2 Hasid**

The follower of the Hasidic movement, a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word. The movement provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

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

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

### **4 Isolation of Jews**

In March 1940 signs were displayed all around Warsaw's Jewish district bearing the warning 'Seuchensperrgebiet' - epidemic infected area. On 27th March 1940 the Jewish Council (Judenrat) was ordered to erect a wall around the district. In June 1940 the first 20 sections of the wall went up. The final date by which Jews had to move into the ghetto was 14th November 1940.

### **5 Warsaw Ghetto**

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

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

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

### **7 Great Action (Grossaktion)**

July-September 1942, mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka extermination camp. This was the first liquidation campaign, during which around 265,000 of 355,000 Jews living in the ghetto were deported, and a further 10,000 were murdered on the spot. About 70,000 people

remained inside the ghetto walls (the majority of them, as unemployed, were there illegally).

## **8 Jewish National Committee (JNC)**

A conspiratorial political organization, created in the Warsaw ghetto at the end of October 1942. It united Zionist parties and organizations as well as the communist party. Its aims were to agitate for support for armed combat, to oversee the nascent combat organization (ZOB) and to represent Jewish organizations in their contacts with the Polish underground (the Home Army). After the failure of the April Uprising the JNC organized aid for Jews in labor camps and partisan groups, and provided financial support to many Jews in hiding. However, its activists' main aim was in helping individuals and groups of people to escape from other ghettos still in existence. At the turn of 1944 and 1945 more than 100 aids groups were active under the auspices of the JNC.

## **9 ZOB (Jewish Fighting Organization)**

An armed organization formed in the Warsaw ghetto; it took on its final form (uniting Zionist, He-Halutz and Bund youth organizations) in October 1942. ZOB also functioned in other towns and cities in occupied Poland. It offered military training, issued appeals, procured arms for its soldiers, planned the defense of the Warsaw ghetto, and ultimately led the fighting in the ghetto on two occasions, the uprisings in January and April 1943.

## **10 Volksdeutscher**

In Poland a person who was entered (usually voluntarily, more rarely compulsorily) on a list of people of ethnic German origin during the German occupation was called Volksdeutscher and had various privileges in the occupied territories.

## **11 Pruszkow transit camp**

From the start of the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944 the civilian population of Warsaw was evacuated to a camp in Pruszkow, a small town in the vicinity of Warsaw. From there they were deported to various labor or concentration camps in Germany. The Pruszkow camp remained in existence until January 1945. Over this period around 650,000 people were imprisoned there.

## **12 Rufeisen, Daniel**

born Oswald Rufeisen to a Jewish family in Poland. He was a Carmelite monk who converted to Christianity during World War II. He emigrated to Israel in the 1950s and asked to be listed as a Jew under the Law of Return, which states that every Jew has the right to settle in Israel, declaring his strong Jewish national identity. The court ruled that the Law of Return did not apply to persons who were born Jewish but converted to another faith. Thus Brother Daniel lost his case, but was later naturalized as an Israeli citizen and lived the rest of his years serving the Carmelite church in Haifa.