Nachman Elencwajg

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Wroclaw
Poland
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Mr. Elencwajg is a retired tailor with whom I meet several times in his apartment in what was formerly the German part of Wroclaw. In this apartment, where he has lived for almost sixty years now, he tells me about his life before the war and his great wartime wandering. Cared for by his grandson, Mr. Elencwajg remembers the various moments of his life, returning with affection to the times of his childhood, spent in the town of Miedzyrzec Podlaski.

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My family background

My name is Nachman Elencwajg. I was born in Miedzyrzec on 1st May 1920. My father, Herszl Elencwajg [1884 - 1922], was a bristle-maker. He made bristles, like most Jews in Miedzyrzec [town ca. 220km east of Warsaw]. He died of tuberculosis when I was two years old. My mother said it was because of the bristles, because there was a lot of dust in that, and that's why she didn't want me to become a bristle-maker. And so I became a tailor.

There were both large factories processing the bristles in Miedzyrzec as well as small one-man workshops. You bought the pig bristles from the farmers when they slaughtered - whole bags of it. Then you combed it and made all kinds of brushes. They were beautiful; some were sold abroad, to be used on ships, for instance. Until 1934 they were also sold to Germany, but when Hitler came to power 1, Jewish merchants started boycotting the Germans. However, buyers still came from England, from America. A big- dollar business. I even remember a situation where, right before the beginning of the war, my father's friend sent a shipment to England worth 600 pounds. The war broke out 2, my father's friend didn't survive, but his partner did, and soon after the war, I don't know how but he got in touch with the British company - and they paid him the money!

I hardly remember my father at all. I know that, as a bristle-maker, he earned quite well. Besides making the bristles, he also tied the products into greater bundles, preparing them for export. He went from one producer to another and tied for them. Because everyone made the bristles but not everyone tied them.

My father died at the age of 38. He developed a lung condition, there was no penicillin; after eight days he gave up and died. This evokes a scene in my mind when my sister carries me out to the hall - because my father died at home - and the mirror in the living room is covered. I don't know whether I can remember this or whether it's simply the subsequent accounts tricking my memory.

I also know that my father's family had its roots in Miedzyrzec. My father had a brother and two sisters. One sister, Reszla, died, and the brother and the other sister, Cipe, both went to America. The brother left even before the war [WWII], and reportedly he also made bristles. And the sister left in 1921. Her name was Elencwajg, married name Lewiter. I visited her in New York in 1985; she said she remembered bathing me when I was a baby. My father also had two cousins, and the female one's father, my father's uncle, was called Hersz. I remember he was an elderly gentleman and he died before the war. But there was only one Elencwajg in Miedzyrzec - my father.

My mother, Lea Elencwajg [1903 - 1942], also came from Miedzyrzec. Her maiden name was Perelman. She had two sisters in Miedzyrzec - Fejga and Estera - and three brothers. Two of those lived in Warsaw. We barely kept in touch with them. They visited Miedzyrzec perhaps once, and my mother went once or twice to visit them in Warsaw. And one uncle, my mother's other brother, went to America and always sent us ten dollars that often saved us after my father's death because my mother was able to pay the rent.

My mother was good at sewing so after my father's death, when great poverty struck us, she started making dresses. But things were still poor because all she took for a dress was one zloty or even eighty groszy - no more. I know that when I apprenticed to a tailor, I went to work without a lunch. My mother quickly organized something, borrowed from someone - she brought me lunch. And I already had one. I bought it. A quarter of cold meat variety. Treyf [i.e. not kosher], because it was cheaper.

Of my mother's relatives I remember one cousin, Uncle Fejga's son. He was called like me, Nachman, and his last name was Zylbersztajn. He legally went to Palestine before the war. He was a member of the Hashomer Hatzair 3, secured the certificate 4 and went. First he worked at a kibbutz, and then he set up his own workshop in Tel Aviv, opposite the bus station. He was a textile worker, operated the machines that made sweaters. After the war, in the seventies, I visited him in Israel; he worked in that workshop of his, together with his son.

Growing up

I had two siblings - my sister Chaja [1912 - 1941], eight years my elder, and my brother Dawid [1916 - 2002], three years my elder. The four of us lived in a single room. There were two beds there, a kitchen annex in the corner. There was no toilet, even in the courtyard. You simply went to the municipal lavatory, which was a couple of hundred meters away. And in the night, when you where afraid to go, you used a bucket and emptied it, when no one was looking, on the street.

My mother tried to keep a kosher kitchen. A couple of years before the war, when I started working and no longer cared for kosher, I started bringing home non-kosher food. My mother hid the forks away from me so that they didn't become treyf. For the high holidays my mother dressed black and went to the synagogue. She did so for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. Normally she didn't go to the synagogue. Nor did she wear a headscarf or a wig. There was one photo of her in a wig at home, but that was for the wedding, or shortly thereafter. I never saw her in a wig.

I remember we observed the high holidays. My mother fasted for Yom Kippur. I was exempted because I was the youngest child, and not very strong, just a skinny boy. For Pesach, you had to order flour for the matzah. We always ordered a pood [16.38 kg]. They baked matzah in several places around town; there was a place on virtually every street, opened only for Pesach. We didn't observe seder because our father wasn't there to run the ceremony. We had relatives, several uncles; they somehow never invited us for seder. That kind of surprises me. They were also poor but half-orphans they could have invited.

The other holidays we observed much less solemnly. For instance, we never had the tent for Sukkot. Some, those who lived in tenement houses and had balconies, set up the tents there. We lived on the first floor and didn't have the possibility.

Ninety percent of Miedzyrzec's population was Jewish. [Editor's note: In 1939 in Miedzyrzec had a population of 18,000 people, and among them ca. 12,000 Jews] The majority of the houses and shops were owned by Jews. There were wealthy Jews but there were also the poor ones. The poor ones lived in small houses without a mud floor. The largest synagogue stood near where we lived. It was very beautiful. It isn't there anymore, but I remember it was very large. It had beautiful lighting, and figures painted during its renovation by a painter who later became very famous, I don't remember his name. For the high holidays, people actually reserved their seats, whereas normally, on Saturday, it wasn't full, perhaps half the seats were taken. Besides the synagogue, there were also prayer places, the shtibls, where the Hasidim 5 met. When some, say, tailor or shoemaker had a larger apartment, two or three rooms, they would meet there to pray.

I went to a Jewish school, the Talmud Torah. My mother sent me there because it was for free. The [Jewish] community financed it. Besides that, there was a state-financed Jewish gymnasium, which we couldn't afford; it was for the upper-class Jews. There was also, I remember, an elementary school where Jewish kids went together with Polish ones, but that was a problem for me because I didn't speak Polish. There were Polish classes at school, some two hours a day, and with time I learned to read a bit, but speaking remained a problem because I spoke Yiddish all the time. When I worked as the tailor's apprentice and he sent me to various clients, Poles, on business, I always memorized on my way what I was supposed to say, for instance, that 'the master asks you to come for a fitting.'

Eventually I completed the school, learned to read and became ever more aware. I read the 'Robotnik' ['The Worker,' a daily, published by the Polish Socialist Party from 1919-1939], and the Bundist paper, the Folksztyme 6. I joined first the Hashomer Hatzair, the youth wing, the Kwir. But I wasn't there for long because I became a communist. I joined the communist youth, where I was active until the war. The organization was illegal. It was the Communist Party of Poland 7, but our unit was made up almost solely by Jews. There were perhaps two Poles among us. We were organized into three-man cells. There was an instructor, several years our elder, who led us. He held various press briefings, told us about history, drew up reports, told us about what had happened at the district or town committee meetings. All kinds of bullshit.

The meetings were secret, so we hid away from people. Once, I remember, we didn't have a place to go so we went to the synagogue, entered through the entrance for women and sat in the women's sector in the dark. It was youthful folly. Our parents turned a blind eye to the whole thing; some actually sympathized with the organization. I remained a communist until the war, but then I

was cured of it, having lived in Russia [USSR] for six years.

Our relations with the Poles were okay. It was customary for the town mayor and his secretary to come to the synagogue for Rosh Hashanah; I remember they looked very dignified, in tailcoats and top hats. They sat at the places of honor and listened to the cantor and the choir. A friend of mine actually sang on that choir. After the concert, they went, and the celebrations continued. The custom survived until 1938, because in 1939 on Rosh Hashanah it was already war.

With the ordinary citizens we also lived on good terms. I remember there was a janitor at the [Jewish] community who was a Pole and had a small boy. The boy wanted to go to the cheder! All his pals went there. And the janitor's wife spoke fluent Yiddish; she was the first to greet me in Miedzyrzec after the war in Yiddish: 'The tailor's son has come!'

There was no street anti-Semitism. Even when Sunday trading had been banned, and my master's shop was open, the policeman looked in the other direction. Perhaps he took money for that? The door was kind of half-open and everything was alright. The owner stood in the door and let people in. This way the shop was open and closed at the same time.

There were nationalists in Miedzyrzec, of course, but they didn't have such a big presence. I remember only one, the leader of the town's Endeks [8], Styczynski. He was a regular customer of the tailor shop I worked at. He often came on a Sunday when he had had a drink. He liked to come then and talk politics with us. He said all the Jews needed to be expelled from Poland, only my master Szmergiel - that was his name - and I should be left. I said there were three million Jews in Poland and twenty million Poles. And if each Pole wanted to protect his two Jews, then the Poles would actually fight for them! I told him the truth! At that point, he would start laughing and swearing.

I remember another story involving him, during the war. It was at the time when Miedzyrzec was in Russian hands [9]. Styczynski had been arrested by the militia, which was made up chiefly by Jews. The reason was that he shouted he had a gun and would shoot at the Russians. And the Poles were silently preparing for a pogrom in revenge for Styczynski's arrest. My master, who treated him a bit like his friend, knew about that. He started collecting signatures among the Jews under a petition saying Styczynski was alright. He collected several hundred signatures and handed that over to the militiamen. I remember it like it was today, I stood on the street when a Russian vehicle arrived.

There was one more prisoner, some landowner from the area, who had been arrested for shooting at the Russians. They were to be taken to Brest, to the underground prison there, the Kleparz, where the NKVD [10] held its trials. They brought out the two of them and put them on the back of the truck. Styczynski crossed himself; he knew he was going to death. At that moment the Jewish militia commander, who had the sheets with the signatures, shouted, 'Styczynski! Off the truck!' which meant he was saved. The man subsequently underwent a transformation. He knew it was the Jews who had saved him and I heard he also helped Jews. Essentially, a good man. I remember he survived the war and continued to live in Miedzyrzec. I actually wanted to visit him in 1946 when I was in town, but I didn't dare.

During the war

I remember the beginning of the war in 1939. On the ninth day of the war [probably] the Germans dropped firebombs on Miedzyrzec, burned half of the town. It was then my friends and I agreed it was time to run. The Germans were close, and we, as communists, would be the first to die. The police had us in their files, so they knew each one of us. And so we ran.

One of my friend's parents had a bike shop, so he took a bike, and everyone had something, a few shirts. And we went, on foot, towards the Russian border, and that was like three hundred kilometers. To the old Russian border! We chose the side roads, going through villages, avoiding the towns. And the Germans were close on our heels. Anywhere we entered, we'd hear the Germans kept advancing. And in the end, on the last day, when we arrived at the border with the Soviet Union, they told us the Russians had entered. Because it was after the 17th of September [when the Red Army invaded Poland to meet the advancing Germans halfway].

It turned out we had covered too many kilometers. We stayed for a while in the town and when we heard the Red Army was heading towards Warsaw, towards the Vistula, we went back to Miedzyrzec. It was, I think, October 1939. Because we had spent some time in that town, Dobrowice, with the Russians. We went by train to Brzesc [city on the Bug river 60 km east of Miedzyrzec, today Brest, in Belarus]. There were no trains from Brzesc, so we went the rest of the way on foot.

When I arrived in Miedzyrzec at the turn of September and October, I met my mother and my brother at home. My sister got married in 1939 and lived somewhere else, but also in Miedzyrzec. The Russians stayed in Miedzyrzec for a week [actually ten days]. I heard the Jews raised the triumphal gate to welcome them on their arrival. But then a Russian officer, a Jew, warned us that Miedzyrzec had been awarded to the Germans and the Russians would withdraw. Which is what happened. [Having spent ten days in the town] the Russians withdrew beyond the Bug.

My sister was the first to flee, to Brzesc. Then she wanted to go back, but couldn't because they arrested her and sent a hundred kilometers east, to Baranowicze [town ca. 400km east of Miedzyrzec, today Baranovichi in Belarus]. I never saw her again. She died with the other Jews when the Germans came in 1941 11. I learned later the Germans dug out mass graves out of the town there and shot all the Jews. My sister had a little baby girl, Cywja, whose photo I was presented with by some miracle, and who died with her mother.

My brother and I stayed in Miedzyrzec under German rule for a few more weeks, until December. Then the Germans introduced those yellow patches 12 that all Jews had to wear outside, and which we were to sew ourselves. It was then me and my brother and some friends decided to run. We went through the countryside to an airfield on the Bug and crossed to the other side. We arrived in Brzesc and stayed there [Brzesc was in Russian hands]. My brother and I got a job at a tailor's shop.

Then I heard all refugees from beyond the Bug were to be sent to Siberia. So me and my brother signed up to be sent to Minsk [city 350 km north-east of Brzesc, today capital of Belarus]. We knew one of our uncles lived there, Uncle Aaron. He was one of my father's cousins; I didn't know the exact connection. Upon arrival in Minsk I went to the police station and the local registry office. And a nice girl working there told me Aaron Elencwajg did indeed live in Minsk but had been transferred to Bobrujsk, [city 150 km south-east of Minsk, today Babruysk in Belarus]. So I had a clue. My brother and I went to Bobrujsk.

In Bobrujsk we encountered a strange situation. We have arrived and we ask around in the Jewish quarter about Uncle Aaron. Everyone just walks away in silence. What's up? Then I walk through the city, cross a street, I look, there's a bristle-making shop. I recognize the tools - the bristle-maker's combs. I think it's here my uncle must be working. I enter through the courtyard, say 'zdrastvuytye, pan' [Russian: 'hello, sir'], because by then I had already learned some Russian, and I ask whether an Elencwajg works here. Everyone looks at me and says nothing, as if they are all mute. How long can I be standing like that? A minute, two - I walk out.

At that point one of the women ran after me and told me my uncle had been taken. Meaning arrested. And that back in 1937 when a campaign was launched against the Trotskyists 13. [Editor's note: Stalin carried out a major purge of Leo Trotsky's supporters in 1937. Cf. Great Terror 14]. Because he was an avowed Trotskyist. They were all arrested and my uncle got five years [of prison]. I asked the woman whether my uncle had a wife, and she said he had a wife who lived in Bobrujsk.

I went to her. She lived in a single room, a cramped cubbyhole, but she found some place for us and put us there. Then she got a job for us - for me and my brother. At Ampel, a tailor cooperative, the head of which was my uncle's friend, a Russian Jew. We worked there until June 1941 when the Germans invaded Russia.

I remember that when the war broke out, I didn't receive my salary. Instead, an alarm was raised to hide, and they never called it off. The Germans were close. The Russians surrendered the city, the police and the military fled. My brother and I ran at first to the forest, near the city. The forest was full of refugees, including women, some I remembered back from Miedzyrzec. During the day I went to town. I see all stores are open and people are looting. I went to the bakery, walked inside, took two loaves of bread. At first people stood in a queue, but when there's no authority, things will soon get chaotic, and everyone started grabbing whatever they could. They took a sheet and loaded as much into it as it would hold.

I returned to the forest where it turned out we had to run. It was because of an elderly Belarussian lady who kept telling everyone the Jews wanted to rape her. No one wanted to rape her because, in the first place, she was old and ugly. But I told my friends that if not the Germans, then she would finish us off. And we organized an escape with a group of several Jews from Lodz who were also camping in that forest and with whom we worked. It was at the last moment because when we were crossing the bridge on the Berezina River, we already heard shots.

I don't know how many days we walked, I only remember from time to time we met a field kitchen, it was the only help. Eventually we reached the town of Krichev [Krycau, large town 250 km east of Minsk, today in Belarus]. There were trains from there. We boarded one and went to Stalingrad. There, at the Dinamo stadium, was a place where they registered you and assigned tickets for your further trip. I applied to be sent to Astrakhan, on the Caspian Sea estuary of the Volga. And that's where we went.

There wasn't any work for us in Astrakhan, there was only a fish processing plant there. On the other hand, we could eat a lot of fish because the boys who fished for them in the Volga sold them almost for nothing. The whole week we ate only fish. Then we got a job at a tailor shop, I mean my brother, as the better tailor of the two of us, sewed, and from time to time gave me something to finish. But I was soon taken to the steppes out of town to build trenches and dugouts. I remember

the Russians had tents and we, the refugees from Poland, slept right on the ground.

One day I felt I had enough, went to the site manager, told him I didn't even have shoes anymore and I couldn't work. He said I could go back to Astrakhan if I wanted but on foot. He even gave me a permit to leave the site. So I went. I walked so fast as to reach some village before dusk. It was winter time and I was afraid to freeze to death. I have arrived in a village and I knock on one door after another, the lights inside are on, but no one opens. But at the very end of the village stood a low cottage where they let me in. Simple and poor people lived there, but besides me there were other refugees there too.

When they let me out in the morning, I saw a Jew from Poland whom I knew from the work in the steppe. He lay, frozen to death, by the road, obviously no one wanted to let him in and he fell to sleep like that. I went my way, reached the Volga, which was frozen, I got to the other side over the ice, to the city [Astrakhan], to my brother.

After some time I learned a Polish army had been set up, the Anders' Army 15, and I and my brother decided to join it. We went by train, without a ticket, which was a torture because we had to hide all the time. When we arrived at the place where the headquarters were, the military police took us straight from the train and actually took us a few stations down the road where the army was stationed and the draft boards worked. They had warm tents, insulated with felt, and us they gave a cold hole and two blankets. When I woke up in the morning, my legs were frostbitten, I could still walk, but they were already reddish. They gave me an E category [i.e. unable for military service] at the board and gave me an assignment to Tashkent in Central Asia [today capital of Uzbekistan].

On our way to Tashkent, we had to spend the night at some kolkhoz and they allotted us a food ration of 40 grams of flour per person. We tried to do something with that. But when I poured water, it was too thin, and when I poured the flour, it was too thick. In the end, I ate most of that flour raw. If I had been to live like that for a week, I wouldn't have survived. And we were in a single room with some Ukrainians who were also rejected by the Anders' Army; they caught a dog, killed it and were roasting it all day. If they had offered me some, I'd have eaten it, but they didn't. My brother and I were small, so we didn't make any demands.

Upon our arrival in Tashkent it turned out they assigned us to Kirghizia [today Kyrgyzstan], to some remote kolkhoz 16 in the mountains. It was so there that it was warm below, but snow in the mountains. Riding up, at some point we had to exchange the horse wagons for a sleigh. We were there for a week or two and a call-up was announced for the Poles. We had to go where the headquarters and the draft board were. There were lists, and until we signed up, they didn't give us anything to eat.

I again appeared before the draft board and again they rejected me. I didn't know what to do. I met some guy who knew a friend of mine and he said he had a sister in Leninabad [today Khudjand, city in Tajikistan, some 200 km north of the capital Dushanbe] and he was going to meet her. I had no other idea, nor did my brother, so we went with him. Khudjand is a city in Tajikistan.

When we arrived in Leninabad, the other guy dumped us. He went straight to his sister without helping us in any way. We went by foot from the station to the town, and it was eight kilometers. Again we had no work, no food, no place to stay. We couldn't get a job until we had a permanent

address. We found a desolate building and registered for residence there. It was a townhouse with a high ceiling, there was nothing inside, we slept on the floor with a sack under our heads. But on the next day we got a job at a silk factory. It was there I finally got the idea what it was all about with those cocoons - I had learned about that in school but didn't understand - how to wet it, how you pull out the thread and make silk. My brother worked there too, he carried nails.

After some time another call-up was ordered. This time they took only my brother. I went to the manager and said I didn't ask for my brother not to be taken, but for me to be allowed to go with him. But the manager said he too would prefer to be with his wife in Moscow. And so they separated us. I would stay there four more years, until 1946.

In the meantime, there was another call-up, they took me far to Siberia, to Petropavlovsk. There was a draft board there, with a Soviet officer who checked where you were from. He had a large map behind him. I said, 'Mezriche,' the Russian for Miedzyrzec. I saw he didn't understand so I showed him on the map. And he saw it was near Warsaw, on the German side, and didn't take me. They called assemblies from time to time and called people by name. Those who weren't called went back to Leninabad. Some three hundred people had arrived, fifty went back. I was in the latter group.

After returning to Leninabad at first I went every day and asked to be allowed to join the Polish army 17, but they kept turning me down. Eventually I found a job at a canned food factory. I didn't want to return to the silk factory because their food rations were tiny. One soup a day and a pound of bread - it was the light industry. And I walked hungry all day. During the Ramadan, the Muslims didn't eat during the day and they sold those soup talons. So once I bought ten talons and it was together a single decent plate of soup!

The plant where I worked made canned meat but also confectionery: halva, dried apricot etc. Unfortunately, you couldn't eat it because armed guards stood everywhere. There was only one place where you could pick something up - the slaughterhouse. A friend of mine worked there, he always brought me something. I worked at the carpenter's shop. I was lucky because, at the silk factory, I also did the carpenter's job so they presented me as a carpenter. The head carpenter was a Jew from Kharkov. I told him I wasn't a carpenter but he still told the Russians I was okay. They were joking that it made sense because we were both Jews, so we'd get along. I stayed there until 1946 when I decided to go back to Poland.

Post-war

They started letting the Poles to Poland in May 1946 18. You had to register and choose whether you wanted to stay or go back to Poland. I wanted to go back, and as I had no documents confirming my citizenship, I presented my old union ID, the only document I had confirming my ties with Poland.

The transport I boarded was headed towards Szczecin. The trip wasn't without its adventures. I got off in Vinnytsya, in Ukraine [city ca. 400km south-west of Kiev], where a girl whom I knew lived. I had met her in Leninabad but then she went to Vinnytsya to take care of her parents. I didn't plan to visit her, but I see - the train is stopping at the station Vinnytsya. I took the bag of dried apricot that I had been given as a means of provisions and went to visit the girl. She already had a new boyfriend, but I didn't bear a grudge.

Getting to Poland was a bigger problem. I went to the station, and there it's just one train a day. To make matters worse, it came full and the conductor didn't want to sell me a ticket. I didn't want to wait another day so I sat between the cars. There it was full there too, but one tall Ukrainians felt something thick in my pocket, thought it was money, and threw out a woman, taking me instead. And I had no money, only some papers. I thought that as soon as we got out of town, he'd kill me, so as soon as the train moved, I ran away from him, several cars down the train. There were Russian soldiers there, going to Vienna from their leave. That's how I got to Lwow.

In Lwow I looked for a train headed towards Poland. I found one, empty, but it was already moving so I quickly hopped on the last car. There was only one officer in the whole train, in the first car. I hoped he'd let me stay or, in the worst case, arrest me. But he came to me and orders me to get off the train. I tell him the train is moving and he wouldn't be so nasty as to throw me out, would he? And he simply threw me out of that train. Luckily there was an embankment there and I somehow survived the fall.

Then I caught another train, in the same direction, and I finally arrived in Poland, as far as Poznan [city 250 km west of Warsaw]. There I met my first train, with my friends - that's how long they had to wait on their way. Unfortunately, my friends thought I wouldn't return so they sold all the stuff I had left on the train, chiefly dried apricot that we received back in Leninabad. But I didn't blame them.

In the end we found ourselves in Szczecin [city 200 km north-east of Poznan]. We were allotted an apartment and given the keys to it. In theory, everything was alright, but I missed Miedzyrzec. I met several acquaintances from there who felt the same. And after a week or two we went to Miedzyrzec. By train from Szczecin to Warsaw, and then, on a Warsaw- Moscow train, to Miedzyrzec. That's how we got to our town.

The situation in Miedzyrzec was that there were only several dozen Jews there. There was a local Jewish committee 19, headed, in fact, by a guy I knew. But it came to nothing for me because he refused to help me in any way. When aid packages came from the US, clothing, I didn't get anything either. Because they [the committee] passed a resolution not to accept any new arrivals because they didn't want Jews to settle there but to go to the ex-German territories instead. As a result, they only helped you if you wanted some document, a paper from the court or something like that, but they didn't allow you to stay.

I didn't know what to do but I met a friend of mine whose brother worked in Zagorze Slaskie, here in Lower Silesia [region in south-western Poland], and he said that brother of his would find us a job. I didn't hesitate for long, nothing kept me in Szczecin, I had left nothing in the apartment there so, just like that, with the keys to the Szczecin apartment still in my pocket, I pulled myself together and went to Zagorze. And that's how I found myself in Lower Silesia.

In Zagorze I worked as a tailor at the former Zimmerman's plant. But that lasted for only three weeks because me and some colleagues set up a cooperative. I even sat on its board because I was young and the older guys didn't want to. The cooperative was called Zgoda [Accord] and had some thirty employees, all tailors.

Some time later a course for technical managers was organized in Wroclaw and they sent me to attend it. When I had completed it and secured the right papers, some acquaintances of mine fixed

a job for me in Wroclaw, at another cooperative, on Nowowiejska Street. Then I worked at several other tailor cooperatives, first as a technical manager, then as a quality surveyor.

I met my future wife back in Zagorze. I was a young and relatively handsome boy, so girls often accosted me. My wife was my age. She's dead now so I don't want to talk about it. I have a son with her, who lives in the US, and a daughter who lives in Wroclaw. My wife died in 1993, at the time when I was hospitalized. I had a tumor, but it wasn't malignant. I just lost 13 kilograms of weight.

After the war, as far as Jewish organizations are concerned, I kept in touch chiefly with the secular ones, like the local Jewish committee. I remember that, back in Zagorze, prayers were being organized, but I never attended. And upon moving to Wroclaw I became active on the Jewish committee. I remember that during the campaign for the 1947 parliamentary elections, we set up a headquarters in my apartment. We met there, and from there we took posters and leaflets that we then stuck up on the walls. We held meetings and gave reports. We visited Jewish homes and campaigned for the government, because we supported it. And very many Jews lived in the area at the time.

I was active on the local committee until 1950 when it was disbanded and the TSKZ 20 was set up instead. I moved to the TSKZ and have been active on it ever since. Until recently I sat on the board as the treasurer, but a year and half ago I gave up because getting there for the meetings had become a hassle. So now I attend the meetings only very seldom.

As for the 1968 events 21, I didn't feel anything on my own skin because I worked at a cooperative that was officially Jewish. So it would have been strange if they fired Jews [for being Jews]. But I remember that at Polmoda, which was a Polish cooperative, they fired even the ordinary tailors. They fired a tailor whom I knew and liked. I went to the cooperative's chairman, whom I knew very well, and asked him for the guy to be given his job back. And they did.

Right after the war I didn't think about emigration. I found some relative in the US and could have left, but I wrote them that things here were nice because I had a job and three meals in the canteen a day. I boasted! And later I actually thought about emigrating to Israel but I had no impulse to do it, no one was forcing me to go. My wife actually wanted to go but I was afraid of the responsibility, a friend wrote me from Israel not to come with a Polish woman because she would find it hard to acclimate herself.

My son, Heniek [Henryk], emigrated to the US in the 1970s. He was born in 1948, so he was less than thirty at the time. He went without any money, as a tourist, and never returned. He has a daughter. At first he worked as a house painter and his wife was a maid, but then they took a loan and bought a motel in New Mexico, a small one, fifteen rooms. They run it at a profit. Their daughter completed architectural studies and is getting married. I got the invitation but I won't go; I'm too sick for that.

My daughter, Marysia [Maria], was born in 1951. She has two sons. One of those, Bartek, lives with me and takes care of me. The other, Tomek, studies at the technical university and is active on the Jewish student organization. He has already been on a visit to Israel, he is very active. They know him at the community.

I rarely go out these days, sometimes, for a high holiday, I take a taxi or my grandson gives me a lift to the synagogue. But there are no young people there. Only old men reading the Torah. The same at the TSKZ. A general assembly was summoned recently, sixty-nine members were to be present, slightly over thirty turned up and the meeting didn't take place. People are passing away, everything is ending. But I'm happy I still have some health and can be sitting here like this.

Glossary

1 Hitler's rise to power

In the German parliamentary elections in January 1933, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) won one- third of the votes. On 30th January 1933 the German president swore in Adolf Hitler, the party's leader, as chancellor. On 27th February 1933 the building of the Reichstag (the parliament) in Berlin was burned down. The government laid the blame with the Bulgarian communists, and a show trial was staged. This served as the pretext for ushering in a state of emergency and holding a re-election. It was won by the NSDAP, which gained 44% of the votes, and following the cancellation of the communists' votes it commanded over half of the mandates. The new Reichstag passed an extraordinary resolution granting the government special legislative powers and waiving the constitution for 4 years. This enabled the implementation of a series of moves that laid the foundations of the totalitarian state: all parties other than the NSDAP were dissolved, key state offices were filled by party luminaries, and the political police and the apparatus of terror swiftly developed.

2 German Invasion of Poland

The German attack of Poland on 1st September 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France. (To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1st September 1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground. To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1st September, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rd September, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.

3 Hashomer Hatzair in Poland

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

members was Mordechaj Anielewicz, who led the rising in the Warsaw ghetto. After the war it operated legally in Poland as a party, part of the He Halutz. It was disbanded by the communist authorities in 1949.

4 Hahalutz

Hebrew for pioneer, it stands for a Zionist organization that prepared young people for emigration to Palestine. It was founded at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia and began operating in Poland in 1905, later also spread to the USA and other countries. Between the two wars its aim was to unite all the Zionist youth organizations. Members of Hahalutz were sent on hakhshara, where they received vocational training. Emphasis was placed chiefly on volunteer work, the ability to live and work in harsh conditions, and military training. The organization had its own agricultural farms in Poland. On completing hakhshara young people received British certificates entitling them to immigrate to Palestine. Around 26,000 young people left Poland under this scheme in 1925-26. In 1939 Hahalutz had some 100,000 members throughout Europe. In World War II it operated as a conspiratorial organization. It was very active in culture and education after the war. The Polish arm was disbanded in 1949.

5 Hasid

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.

6 Folksztyme /Dos Yidishe Wort

Bilingual Jewish magazine published every other week since 1992 in Warsaw in place of 'Folksshtimme', which was closed down then. Articles are devoted to the activities of the JSCS in Poland and current affairs, and there are reprints of articles from the Jewish press abroad. The magazine 'Folksshtimme' was published three times a week. In 1945 it was published in Lodz, and from 1946-1992 in Warsaw. It was the paper of the Jewish Communists. After Jewish organizations and their press organs were closed down in 1950, it became the only Jewish paper in Poland. 'Folksshtimme' was the paper of the JSCS. It published Yiddish translations of articles from the party press. In 1956, a Polish- language supplement for young people, 'Nasz Glos' [Our Voice] was launched. It was apolitical, a literary and current affairs paper. In 1968 the paper was suspended for several months, and was subsequently reinstated as a Polish-Jewish weekly, subject to rigorous censorship. The supplement 'Nasz Glos' was discontinued. Most of the contributors and editorial staff were forced to emigrate.

7 Communist Party of Poland (KPP)

Created in December 1918 in Warsaw, its aim was to create a global or pan-European federal socialist state, and it fought against the rebirth of the Polish state. Between 1921 and 1923 it

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

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

9 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.

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

11 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.

12 Armbands

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

13 Trotsky, Lev Davidovich (born Bronshtein) (1879-1940)

Russian revolutionary, one of the leaders of the October Revolution of 1917, an outstanding figure of the communist movement and a theorist of Marxism. Trotsky participated in the social-democratic movement from 1894 and supported the idea of the unification of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks from 1906. In 1905 he developed the idea of the 'permanent revolution'. He was one of the leaders of the October Revolution and a founder of the Red Army. He widely applied repressive measures to support the discipline and 'bring everything into revolutionary order' at the front and the home front. The intense struggle with Stalin for the leadership ended with Trotsky's defeat. In 1924 his views were declared petty-bourgeois deviation. In 1927 he was expelled from the Communist Party, and exiled to Kazakhstan, and in 1929 abroad. He lived in Turkey, Norway and then Mexico. He excoriated Stalin's regime as a bureaucratic degeneration of the proletarian power. He was murdered in Mexico by an agent of Soviet special services on Stalin's order.

14 Great Terror (1934-1938)

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

15 Anders' Army

The Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, subsequently the Polish Army in the East, known as Anders' Army: an operations unit of the Polish Armed Forces formed pursuant to the Polish-Soviet Pact of

30th July 1941 and the military agreement of 14th July 1941. It comprised Polish citizens who had been deported into the heart of the USSR: soldiers imprisoned in 1939-41 and civilians amnestied in 1941 (some 1.25-1.6m people, including a recruitment base of 100,000-150,000). The commander-in- chief of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR was General Wladyslaw Anders. The army never reached its full quota (in February 1942 it numbered 48,000, and in March 1942 around 66,000). In terms of operations it was answerable to the Supreme Command of the Red Army, and in terms of organization and personnel to the Supreme Commander, General Wladyslaw Sikorski and the Polish government in exile. In March-April 1942 part of the Army (with Stalin's consent) was sent to Iran (33,000 soldiers and approx. 10,000 civilians). The final evacuation took place in August-September 1942 pursuant to Soviet-British agreements concluded in July 1942 (it was the aim of General Anders and the British powers to withdraw Polish forces from the USSR); some 114,000 people, including 25,000 civilians (over 13,000 children) left the Soviet Union. The units that had been evacuated were merged with the Polish Army in the Middle East to form the Polish Army in the East, commanded by Anders.

16 Kolkhoz
In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

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

18 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.

19 Central Committee of Polish Jews

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

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

21 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.