

# Emanuel Elbinger

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Cracow

Poland

Interviewer: Jolanta Jaworska

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*Mr. Emanuel Elbinger lives alone in a one-room apartment on a high-rise estate in Cracow. He looks after his younger but very frail sister Pola and is an active member of the Cracow branch of the Children of the Holocaust Association [1](#). Several times a year he travels to Belgium to visit family, and friends and relatives from all over the world often come to see him. Mundek, as everyone calls him, also likes soccer, and occasionally drops by one of Cracow's pubs to watch a match.*

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## **My family history**

My surname is Elbinger, first name Emanuel. I was born on 2nd January 1931 in Cracow, and before the war I lived in the town of Nowe Brzesko, that's 25 kilometers from Cracow. My two younger sisters were born when we were already living in Nowe Brzesko.

My grandmother on my father's side was called Genendl, and her surname was the same as Father's: Elbinger. Only she'd been married once before. Elbinger was her second husband; the first was Zabner. She'd had children in her first marriage, but I didn't know them, they didn't live in Nowe Brzesko. She was religious; she wore a sheitl. She dressed typically old-fashioned: long black skirt and blouse. She was a widow. But my parents used to say that my grandfather had been very religious. Did nothing but pray. It used to be called studying. All day long sitting at his books while she – which was very common with religious Jews – took care of the running of the house, that there was something to live on, a wage – 'pernusy,' it's called in Jewish [Yid.: parnasa].

Grandmother was blind, and I'd often have to take her places, take her round – she'd lost her sight, you see. Our house was quite a way from her house – well, quite a way or not, but for a small town quite a way. On the Main Square too, only on the opposite side. Grandmother lived on her own. She managed on her own, because you see it was her house, and she lived just in one little room. Her other son [Zamwel] and his family lived in that house with her, too. So I'm sure my cousins helped her about as well. I think her illness, that she was blind, made her feel forced to depend on other people, and that must have made her... well, it's hard to be happy, isn't it, if you've got a handicap

like that? I know that in earlier days she went to Cracow a lot, to see doctors, tried to get help. When she went to Cracow, my cousin Abraham, who lived there, would go with her to the doctors. Grandmother owned four houses in the Main Square. One two-story one, which she lived in, and three single-story ones. Grandmother was very enterprising and capable, and she and my grandfather built the 2-story house themselves. Before World War I, I think. As for the other houses, I don't know exactly, but she probably bought them.

Grandmother's house was the nicest house in Nowe Brzesko, with a balcony. There were nice stoves in there. I remember the address: Main Square 9. It was part sublet – on the first floor were the post office and some shops. On the second floor was a photography studio. Grandmother's house was a corner house – the corner of the Square and Pilsudskiego Street, which led to the Old Square – there were two squares in Nowe Brzesko, you see. Grandmother had another 2 single-story cottages stuck on to the corner one, in the Square as well, and one more little house stuck on from Pilsudskiego Street. The houses had a shared courtyard. Going further along Pilsudskiego there's the Old Square, on it the church, and further on the street leads towards the [River] Vistula. That's 1 kilometer. Down there back before the war there was a huge, marshy common there as well – between Nowe Brzesko and the Vistula flood wall – there's a flood wall there. Part marshy, by the flood wall, but nearer to the town dried out. On the other side of the Vistula you're in the village of Ispina and the Niepolomice Forest, so it's a very interesting area.

My father was born in Nowe Brzesko in 1900 in the house where Grandmother lived, and brought up there. His name was Boruch Mordechaj. Father was a good-looking man, and so he had the nickname 'Doll'. Yes, you see he was quite handsome. He wasn't tall. He didn't wear a beard, but he did wear a Jewish-style cap – they were these round ones, with a short peak. He didn't go out without a cap, with a bare head, no – he was religious, you see. Apart from that, he wore normal, European clothes. Father didn't have an education, only the religious sort [he went to cheder].

Father had three brothers. One of them, Zamwel, lived in Nowe Brzesko. He had a wife and two sons my age. I don't remember their names. They had a shop too, but not dry goods, a food store – in Grandmother's house. Maybe it was Grandmother used to run it, when she still had her sight. Two of Father's brothers were in Cracow. Yes, Moryc lived on Miodowa [Street], and had a textile wholesaler's. He had two daughters: Ida and Giza. I knew both of them; by then they were young girls. The other brother had a food store on Zwierzyniecka Street. I don't remember his name. I went to visit him there back before the war. They had one son, Abraham. Then there were Father's half-brothers, but they didn't keep in touch with them at all. But the four brothers stuck together.

Father and Mother were about the same age. She was born in 1900 or 1901 too. Mother was born in Strzemieszyce. That's a small town in Silesia, near Katowice [approx. 80 km from Cracow]. People tended to call her by her Jewish name, Rajzel, but she had Roza in her papers. Her maiden name was Margulies. She had medium length hair. Mine was curly, but I don't know who that was after. She was of medium build. To me, Mother was the most beautiful in the world, and most of all I think she was educated, and Father wasn't. I think she'd graduated from gymnasium and was head and shoulders over Father when it came to intellect. In our family, Mom was more enterprising compared to Father, more lively, knew this and that – though she was from a religious family too.

To my mind she was a fantastic person. Mother was well in with the local elite: with the secretary of Nowe Brzesko borough, who she knew well, with his wife, with the teachers in Nowe Brzesko too. Well, as far as Nowe Brzesko went, that was the sort of... intellectual clique, if you like. Mother was the only one in town who could speak French – I remember when the first Germans arrived, the officers, she could talk to them in French. I don't know where she'd learnt French. She must have wanted to learn it, because she certainly didn't learn it at school. She was from a religious family, but not such an orthodox one that their whole life centered on praying – above all there was a living to be earned. I don't know what Mother's parents did. As I remember, her parents were already dead, only her brothers and sisters were still alive. Her two brothers lived in Bedzin [approx. 100 km west of Nowe Brzesko]. One definitely was called Dawid. The other one had a typical Jewish name... I can't remember. I remember he was tall. The shorter one was Dawid. Mother's sister, Frania, lived in Chrzanow [approx. 60 km west of Nowe Brzesko]. Long before the war she and her family immigrated to Antwerp, to Belgium. Mother had family in Sosnowiec [approx. 100 km west of Nowe Brzesko] too, but I don't remember exactly who.

I think my parents met through matchmakers. It was a very good marriage. My sister Pola [Mr. Elbinger's sister was called Priwa, but her father changed her name to Pola in 1945] was born in 1932, and Lusia [Lea] in 1934. We spoke Polish at home. My parents knew Yiddish, and sometimes spoke it to each other. Mother spoke Polish perfectly; Father sometimes dropped Yiddishisms in, because he'd spoken more Yiddish at home.

After their wedding Father and Mother set up their own dry goods store. Before that Father had been a glazier, but because he had a brother in Cracow with a cloth wholesale, they decided to get into the same business, because I presume they could get things on credit from him. I don't really know, because I wasn't into the business back then, I was too young. And usually Father bought his goods from his brother, brought them in carts from the wholesale. For the shop my parents rented a house that was even more central on the Square, on the Cracow – Sandomierz road. That house was rented from a Polish Christian family, the Lipnickis. It was a good location, because the biggest business was done at the markets. Before the war there were markets once a week, on Mondays. It's a farming region, so the farmers used to bring their produce, crops, horses, other things, and of course they had the time that day, and they bought everything they needed in the town. Our shop, I think, was quite well stocked. It was one of the bigger shops in Nowe Brzesko. Father and Mother ran it. On market day my parents would get someone in to help because there were so many customers. Mother looked after the shop all day, of course, kept shop. The house too, and the children – sometimes it was too much. So a woman would come in. She just looked after us children. She wasn't permanent, live-in. From time to time, to take us for walks or wherever. No, she wasn't Jewish.

### Growing up

In the house where our shop was we had quite a big apartment. Behind the shop there was a kitchen and my parents' room – this big bedroom. I can't remember if we children had a separate room. I think there was a corner set aside for us. My parents had 2 beds side by side, and apart from that I think there were extra beds for us, small ones. Some things fade... Further along, beyond the kitchen, was our stockroom, with the materials. And there was some other store room there too... boots – I think. There wasn't a bathroom. There was this wooden lavatory set up in the yard. My parents didn't have too much money, but we weren't a poor family. It was more like we

helped others, in the sense that on Saturdays we'd give all sorts of donations to the poor, collected funds. There were quite a lot of people like us there, because there were craftspeople, production.

The first thing I can remember from Nowe Brzesko is Pilsudski's death [2](#). That was 1935. I was four, but I remember it as if it was yesterday. In Szmajser's yard – he made shoe uppers – there was this huge... pear tree, I think it was, and there under it was this guy lying on the ground. Asleep, in the daytime. Hot, it was. 'Why's he lying there like that?' I asked. So someone told me: 'He's drunk, because Grandfather's died.' Pilsudski was known as 'Grandfather.' That's the first thing I remember.

Brzesko was a borough. It had once had a city charter, but before the war [WWII] it no longer did. Before World War I there had been Russians in Brzesko [3](#), a Russian garrison was stationed there, and there was an Orthodox church. It was in the Russian partition, and the border was along the Vistula. Nowe Brzesko was the Russian side, but beyond the river was Galicia [4](#), that was Austria. As I remember from childhood, Nowe Brzesko was buzzing with life, because I think the Jewish community was more... a bit more lively than the Poles. Nowe Brzesko was a town where a large proportion – well, not large, but there were quite a few Jews living there. There were maybe 100, 200 – so everyone knew each other. Ten percent of the town [Editor's note: in 1939 there were approx. 2000 people in Nowe Brzesko. The Jews made up approx. 20% of the population]. The Poles didn't necessarily all know each other, because it was quite spread out.

The center of Nowe Brzesko was where the Jews lived. Lots of the Jews had beards and sidelocks. Different caps, overcoats and tzitzit underneath, though not all of them. Broadly speaking, some were merchants and some craftsmen. All trades, and artisan production. And there was even a factory, I mean a shirt producer – it belonged to the Ickowicz family, a factory making trousers, clothes. I remember the tinkers – one of them, who had a workshop on Lubelska Street, used to make me whistles. That tinker made various things, including bowls, and I used to go round to see him because I was interested in how he did things with that metal – cut it, and then soldered it with zinc. Well, and there were a lot who made shoes. Some made uppers, others the bottoms. There was a division: the ones who made uppers separately, and the cobblers separately again, and they mended them afterwards – because you wore shoes until they wore out. You had them patched, re-heeled, and it was all expensive. You had your shoes made by the cobbler. He fitted you – what leather? Better, worse? You agreed a price. The same with clothes. There were Jewish tailors, a lot of them.

Just a small town, and yet it was full of craftsmen, all the craftwork really was done by Jews. They made things to sell to the farmers from the villages round about at the markets. Some of the Jews traded in crops. The people who acted as agents in the sale of crops from the manors were Jews. There were horse traders, cow traders. And shops too. There were butchers, bakeries – two super bakeries that didn't supply just the Jews, but everyone. I used to take the chulent to the bakery on Krakowska Street. I remember watching them make matzah for the holidays [Pesach] – they only baked it in that one bakery. They used to cut out these big thin circles and run this cutter wheel over them, and then toss them into the oven with a wooden paddle. And then they took it right out of the oven, because it was so thin. There wasn't a Polish bakery. All Jews.

No-one worked on Saturday, of course. The Jewish shops were closed and it was all festive. Everyone would play chess or checkers on the street – but that was the men. The women gossiped,

met up. Everybody put tables and chairs outside their houses and sat around like that. And in the Square there were a few Jewish food stores that as well as the shop, out the back had a little room, like a cake shop, as it were. And on Saturdays the men used to go there and drink colored water, or fizzy drinks, eat cookies and talk. You weren't allowed to pay on Saturdays, of course, so I suppose they paid on Monday. Father never went there - I just saw it, because it was in the neighborhood, and I would wonder that they could afford it. The proprietor there was called Kopel. We went for walks on Saturdays, along the Vistula, and then towards Smilowice [approx. 5 km east of Nowe Brzesko]; there's a manor there [a neo-Classical house dating from ca. 1805 and a park, now ruined]. You took a big scarf to have something to sit on, and food. And then we'd sit in a meadow somewhere and eat. Life was... well, back then it seemed normal and good to me.

You went to cheyder [correct form: cheder] from when you were six [Editor's note: boys usually went to cheder from the age of 3]. There wasn't a Jewish school in Nowe Brzesko, but there was a [ritual] butcher and he was our melamed. It was his cheyder. You paid to go. I don't remember what he was called. He'd given over one of his private rooms in his apartment to it. The butcher had a beard, I remember, and he was quite sturdy, not a young man. He wore an overcoat. And I learnt the Bible [Old Testament] with him, and at the same time I learnt Hebrew and Jewish. Some of the boys already knew Jewish, but I didn't. The Bible is in Hebrew, but at the lessons it was translated word by word into Jewish, not into Polish. I remember to this day what I learnt, those bits from the Bible. It was the 5 Books of Moses, the Mish [correct form: Mishnah; the compendium of oral law edited by Rabbi Judah haNasi in approx. 200 A.D.], it's called. And I even studied the Gemara [the compendium of commentaries and explanations supplementary to the Mishnah; together they make up the Talmud]. I went there for two years.

The Torah is the Jews' holy book, and it's divided up over the whole year. Every week there's a different section - parsha [Heb.: part], it's called - and it's read out in the synagogue. When we went to cheyder, the teacher went over it with us too, and talked about that parsha. We didn't understand much of it, but on Saturday I didn't go to cheyder but to one of the citizens who knew the Torah, and I had to give an account of what I'd learnt over the week. And I remember I was quizzed by this one guy, who lived in the Square, and if I knew it, all of it, he would pinch me on the cheek with satisfaction. He used to give me something to eat there. No, I didn't just go to him, to various families. I think it was either Father asked someone to test me, or the butcher himself sent us. All the children used to do that, because it forced you to study better. If I had to go and talk about what I'd learnt, then I had to try and remember what I'd been taught. All in all I went to cheyder for about two or three years, because at the beginning of the war I was still going. I think it was every day except Saturday and Sunday. Yes, I went on my own, because it wasn't far. I don't remember how long I was there for, an hour or two. I couldn't say how many of us there might have been in that one room... five, ten - more or less the same age. Boys of other ages went too, but at different times.

Mother did every thing in the kitchen. She cooked and baked. We had a 100 percent kosher kitchen. Not far from Nowe Brzesko is Hebdow [approx. 2 km from Nowe Brzesko], and there there was a manor [1149-1818 Norbertine monastery; after the dissolution of the Hebdow order the property was taken over by the State Treasury; from 1949 a Piarist monastery]. We bought supposedly kosher milk from there. Kosher in the sense that it was in clean vessels, right, because milk is kosher anyway, only it mustn't be in the same vessels that have had meat in them. I think

the Jews had an agreement with the manor dairy to ensure that the milk was clean. There was one Jew from Nowe Brzesko who got whole cans of milk from the manor, carried them into town, and you could buy from him. They were cans the lids of which were also liter measures. Yes, he poured it into the lid and that was a liter of milk. Then you poured it into your own pan. That's how it was sold.

The Jews have ritual slaughter. I used to take the chicken to the butcher myself – in our house we always bought a chicken for Saturday. You didn't eat meat all week, perhaps some cold cuts or something, but other than that we lived very frugally, because before the war meat was a luxury. I used to take a live chicken, because it wasn't allowed any other way, and he – a specialist at it – one second, and... he cut its throat in a special way, so it bled out entirely. The thing was to kill the animal without suffering, as they say [Heb.: shechitah, the ritual slaughter of animals and birds].

And I know that when we had that chicken for Saturday, even though there were five of us, we always gave the giblets to this poor family, the water carrier's, so that they at least would have something to make chicken broth with for Saturday – the wings, the head – the giblets. They used to come and we'd give it to them. He was a carrier by trade, he carried mostly water, because there was no mains system in Nowe Brzesko. There was a well in the Square. He was called Henoch, he lived near the synagogue, and I remember he had a squint. He lived off whatever people gave him. I remember he was poor, but a strong man. It wasn't only Jews hired him. Anything that needed doing, he'd do it. He carried wood, coal too. When there were matches in Nowe Brzesko – they were played on the common – he would get a wheelbarrow with lime in and push it round and mark out the pitch markings with the lime.

There was a mikveh in Nowe Brzesko. There was everything. A synagogue, a mikveh, a cemetery and a doss house for vagrants. A small town, but all the needs of the Jewish community were met [Nowe Brzesko didn't have its own rabbi; it was part of the Miechow Jewish community and used the services of the rabbi in Proszowice, from 1936 Nuchem Beer Horowitz]. The mikveh was on the southern edge of town, out towards the common, because the mikveh has to be on the site of a spring, and there was a spring there. I went to the mikveh every Friday, Yes, with Father, of course. It was this pool, and in the pool there was a cast-iron stove; it was lit and gave hot water – because other than that the water that flowed in from the spring was cold. And then there was a room where all the men washed, of course. The women had a different day. Men had Friday, before Saturday, because Saturday starts on Friday evening, when you go to synagogue.

The synagogue [now converted into a house] was on a side road off the Old Square, at the back of Lubelska Street, on this little square. Father didn't have a beard, so he wasn't some kind of fanatic, but he prayed every day, and on Saturdays he went to synagogue, and took me too. On Saturday, because the shop was closed that day. It was a brick building, I remember. Inside – because pictures of human figures aren't allowed – there were no pictures, just various maxims from the Bible. I remember those inscriptions. This painter used to come and write them out by hand. And that's where you sat. I remember snuff – they used to offer each other snuff, and all of them took it, and sniffed it, and sneezed. And that was very fashionable in that synagogue. Yes, but not during the prayers. In Judaism anyone who knows how to can lead the prayers. You just get up and pray. We didn't have a cantor. So it was whoever knew how. Even Father. They all knew how to pray, and one would stand up and lead. One one time and another the next – they took it in turn. Rather monotonous, it was.

And I remember once Father spoke in the synagogue, he said that the Jews were in danger, fire, what was happening in Hitler's Germany – that was 1938. The pogroms were already in progress, the Crystal Night [5](#). I didn't understand about the Crystal Night, I just sensed that something ill was afoot. He said that whoever could should help, to buy land in Palestine, to try and have our own state. He wasn't a true Zionist [6](#), because he didn't belong to any organization, but in spirit. So under his influence I was in favor of the idea for a Zionist state. And I remember that in our shop there were these 2 tins, and anyone who wanted to could put money in so that land could be bought, for Keren Kayemet [7](#) and Keren Hayesod [8](#).

Next to the synagogue there was this wooden doss house, because there were poor Jews, homeless ones, too, who wandered from town to town because they had nowhere to live. I remember what it was like: there were these palliasses, straw mattresses, some cupboards... The Jewish cemetery was two or three kilometers outside Nowe Brzesko, in a field.

As a child I wasn't so very well-behaved. I remember I got a hiding from Father once. My sister had this doll that cried, moved its eyes, said 'Mama,' and I was intrigued as to how it could do that. And one night I cut it open to see what was making the crying. And the sawdust came out, I got to the mechanics, and then I got a hiding. And besides that, I know I didn't have enough calcium, because I used to dig bits of lime out of the wall and eat them, and I used to get a hiding for that too.

With my friends I mostly chased around and fought, that's how it was – boys will be boys. There were Jewish children, Polish children, and we used to go down to the common together. There were worse ones than me, but... we often used to fight, at the drop of a hat. I remember once one of them pushed me, I had a pocket knife in my hand, and it cut me by my eye. It didn't damage my eye, but I had to go to the doctor to have it dressed. I remember that down on the common the boys would pull birds out of nests, kill the baby ones. Drown cats and dogs – that's the way it is in the country. What to do when there's so many puppies and nobody wants them? I didn't like it, but I watched them doing it. I didn't take part, because it turned my stomach to kill a live creature. But there was a kind of cruelty in those boys...

And then there were osiers on the common, and leeches, and we gathered blackberries. The water was clean, there were all sorts of streams. I used to go swimming there. I used to like climbing trees too. I had skates and I went skating in the winter. There wasn't a bridge over the Vistula, but there was a ferry. I used to go down there and watch the horses get on, the carts and what have you, but it was maybe only once I crossed the river. The ferry was attached to these metal cables so the current didn't sweep it away. And apart from that there were oars, I think, but I can't remember now. So life in Nowe Brzesko was a bit rural, like. I used to like horses, used to go up to them while they were grazing. Once a horse bit me, caught me between the legs. There were horse traders there – the Jews traded in horses. And the whippersnappers, their sons, used to ride the horses just like that, without saddles, bareback. Some Jews had farms, and there were a few horse traders and cow traders. One, Niemiec, his name was, even survived [WWII]. And later on he married the gal who'd hidden him.

There were grain stores in Nowe Brzesko too, I remember – the Jews bought crops from the manors not just for themselves, but for wholesale. One of the traders who had a grain store, Strossberg, had a son my age, and we used to go there. His name was Fawek, but in Polish they used to call him Romek. In the evening, after the store closed, he used to let us in, we'd slit the sacks and

gorge ourselves on poppy seed. Huge, those sacks were, 100 kilos or something.

In Nowe Brzesko there were lots of Jewish families that were in jam-making. I remember one, Pioro, I think their name was. They used to buy plum orchards on the tree. I mean the orchards themselves belonged to the manor, or to larger farms, but they bought the fruit before the harvest. And some years the harvest would be good, and sometimes not so good. And then they'd make jam from them. I saw them making it, but I don't really remember how now. There'd be this big fire burning, they tipped the plums in, at first just to dry them off, if you like: the heat comes up and they dry out, and go this dark plum color. And then they stewed them in big pots.

I used to go to soccer matches of course, because there was a team in Nowe Brzesko, and there was a team called Proszowianka too – Proszowice was a bit bigger town, eight kilometers from Nowe Brzesko. I used to walk there sometimes with Father if he had something to do there. Nowe Brzesko played matches with other small towns. The grown-ups' matches were on the common, and we used to have a kick-around in the Square. The Square in Nowe Brzesko was big, rectangular. There was a statue of the Virgin Mary there [erected 1872 on the site of the former town hall to mark the 1863 January Uprising], with a little fenced garden around it. That was the only bit of green and flowers, around that statue. And I remember there were May services there [Catholic services held throughout the month of May in honor of the Virgin Mary]. You used to hear them singing... The Square was cobbled. On a Monday, when the market was full, you couldn't play soccer, but otherwise we played on the Square. That's more or less what life was like.

I remember that when the Monday markets were on in the Square, when there were the most customers, the priest used to stand in the doorway of our shop and stop customers coming in. He was the parish priest, I saw him as a huge figure – and he would point at our shop: 'Don't buy here from Jews! [9](#) There's a Christian shop over there, buy there!' But it didn't do any good, because people would come in round the back. Yes, because I presume it was cheaper in our shop than in the Christian shop. That was for one, and for another, we would sell on credit, mostly to people we knew. And that was my first shock. I don't remember what year that was... 1938 or 1939. It was in the last years before the war that it started to get bad. It all went rotten. Luckily, after that anti-Semite died, another priest came along, a decent guy. His sister lived in the presbytery too – she was obviously single – and later she got friendly with my mother.

And I got my second shock in school, when I went to first grade at the Polish elementary school. Before the war I only did first grade – in the 1938-1939 school year. And the boys, at least a lot of them, said: 'I don't want to sit at the same desk as a Jew.' They'd gotten that from home, of course – we were seven years old. I didn't have that. People wanted to sit with me, maybe because I could draw. I remember like yesterday, we were told to draw a tree. So I drew all the branches, the leaves, but the others couldn't do it so I helped them, drew bits for them. I could draw basic things, but I couldn't draw from my imagination. If I could see the thing, a figure, then I could pick up the chalk and draw on the blackboard, and there would be a likeness. I sat with a non-Jew, with Strzeszynski Janusz. He's a doctor now, an oncologist, I think. There weren't many Jews in the class, 10 percent, say.

It was a co-educational school, I think; I seem to remember boys and girls. We had math, Polish, drawing. I had this one set-to – beyond belief, I took it very hard. There was one teacher who taught all the lessons. And it was a math lesson. And that teacher asked one of the pupils what

was, say, 2 times 2 – I don't remember exactly. And he didn't know. And behind him was sitting this little Jewish guy, tiny, he was, his parents were house-to-house salespeople. They had this portable stall in a case, and went from house to house round the villages selling their wares, taking orders and bringing the goods the next week. They supplied the farmers with thread, needles and what have you. Poor, very poor people. And that little boy knew what 2 times 2 was. He must have heard so much arithmetic at home that basic sums must have been a cinch to him. And he whispered the answer to the other boy. And the teacher: 'You stinking Yid.' Yes. She hauled him out from behind the desk – back then you used to get rapped across the hands for being naughty, and he got the ruler. But that word, to such a small boy..., I knew him well, because he was the same age as me, just small and skinny. I can see him now, but what his name was I can't remember unfortunately. 'You stinking Yid,' and that was 1939.

That guy Szmajser, who lived in the Square, was the only one who had a tube radio, because other than that they were all crystal sets. Battery operated, of course, because we didn't have electricity. He used to put the radio in the window and I remember those screams of Hitler's, because they used to broadcast his speeches on the radio in German. The threat of war was already real, because it was 1939.

I went to Bedzin with Mother to visit family – I don't know – maybe two weeks, a month before the outbreak of war. The Polish army had already been mobilized [Editor's note: full mobilization was not announced until 30 August 1939; what Mr. Elbinger saw was probably an army parade]. And I remember the cavalry – on their horses, with lances, here those boots, spurs everywhere, and how it rang! I thought it was such a force that if war broke out they would smash the Germans to smithereens, see, because it made such an impression. Uhlans [the Polish light cavalry]. Sabers, lances, a fantastic impression. In fact there was this one Jewish family, the Smietanas or Smetanas, and one of their sons was in the Polish army, and he would often come to Nowe Brzesko on leave. This great hulking guy with a saber used to come to the synagogue to pray in his uniform, so all the kids would look at him, see, like an idol. A saber at his side... an uhlans!

Polish propaganda before the war had it that the Germans were starving, they didn't have anything to eat, and that was why they had to wage war, to seize food in Poland. The propaganda was sick altogether – they said that the German tanks were made of cardboard, that there would be a gas war like in World War I. I remember that all the windows were criss-crossed with sticky paper to protect from blasts, and sealed to stop gas. Then the propaganda had it that the Germans were cutting out tongues. I used to eavesdrop on what the older people said a lot.

### **During the war**

I remember the first Germans coming into the town because I was outside. They came from Cracow [the German army occupied Cracow on 6 September 1939], along the Cracow - Nowe Brzesko - Koszyce road to Sandomierz that ran along the Vistula. I was out there on this square, and I was surprised, see, because after what I'd seen in Bedzin I was sure that the Polish army was so powerful. And that day the Polish army had retreated, but the tail-end was still there: one horse, this two-wheel buggy, and two Polish soldiers. The first German came in on a motorcycle, and those two soldiers put their hands up. So I'm thinking to myself: 'What's going on?' But of course they took their belts off and surrendered their weapons. Then a whole group of Germans came along on bikes. They stood there and wouldn't let anyone go in the direction of Koszyce and

Sandomierz, but sent everyone north, on the Proszowice road. My, there were battles in Proszowice [the German artillery destroyed approx. 30% of the homes there]. They resisted.

There wasn't any fighting in Nowe Brzesko, and later the same day - it was 1st September [Editor's note: probably 5th or 6th September], so it was hot, see, stifling - the German soldiers on the Square drew water from the well, stripped to the waist, and splashed themselves. And they gave the children candy and bread - the Germans behaved marvelously when they occupied Nowe Brzesko. Lots of people, especially Jews, fled. They took rucksacks and fled east [10](#), so as not to encounter Germans. My father took a rucksack too, but, well, he didn't get very far. The Germans were faster, because they were on motorbikes. And a few days later he came back.

Of course I didn't go to school anymore, because as soon as the Germans came, the first ban was that Jewish children weren't allowed to go to school [Editor's note: schools re-opened in October 1939, and Jewish children were banned from January 1940]. And as far as I know, the headmaster, Stanislaw Szymacha, behaved very decently: he called a meeting of all the parents and apologized: it wasn't his fault, he'd had an order, that unfortunately there was a ban. And that was where my education ended. My parents soon had to close the shop too. And then the German decrees - that was awful, because they came down on the Jews. The Jews' problems started straight off. Although there were no Germans there, they often came from Cracow or somewhere. For various reasons, even to buy geese. On the common there were marshy meadows, and the Germans were draining them, so of course they got Jews to dig the ditches. My father too. I used to bring him food. For no pay, the borough just put out a list of who was to go. But that was the least of all the harassment.

We had to wear armbands [11](#). I didn't wear one, because it was from age 13 [Editor's note: armbands had to be worn from age 10]. You weren't allowed to walk on the sidewalk, only on the road. You weren't allowed to leave the town at all. It was like a ghetto, only without walls, so food wasn't hard to come by if you had money. There was just the ban on leaving town. It was easy to get around the rules, because there weren't any Germans. In theory everyone had to have an armband, but Mother wore a peasant-type headscarf, which hid the armband.

We had to move out of the house we rented from the Lipnickis after a while, because they threw us out. We got one little room in one of Grandmother's houses. There were five of us in that room, but you were happy anyway. Another Jewish family, that made shirts, was already renting there, and they had to squash up because of us, and that's how we lived.

I remember this scene, I couldn't tell you what year it was, but probably 1940 or 1941. Some German soldiers came to town, Wehrmacht, I think, not the SS. A lot of Jews still had beards at the time, and I remember that they hauled the barber out. The barber was a Jew too, but the Germans evidently didn't know that. They ordered him to cut off beards. They caught the Jews, took them there, and the barber had to cut their beards off. On the Square. That's how I saw it, because we were still living in the Square. And I remember the butcher, because they caught him too. I remember how one of the Germans held his machine gun in front of his ankles and another one made him jump over it. And then they forced a few more Jews to do it. They made the barber cut the butcher's beard off too. He did it quite gently. And all the people whose beards he cut off had to pay - they'd put this basket out. At the end, I don't know who, but somebody said that the barber was a Jew too. It wasn't much money, so they didn't take it, just scattered it across the Square, and people came and collected the money.

When they started setting up the ghetto in Cracow [12](#) in 1941, most of the Jews who lived there thought it would be quieter in the small towns, and they didn't all go to the ghetto, but instead tried to move out to the little towns. And quite a lot of people came to Nowe Brzesko too, mostly craftspeople. Some were German Jews who'd been in Cracow [13](#). They rented single rooms wherever they could. Everyone needed the money, so you squeezed up. So suddenly there were quite a lot of Jews in Nowe Brzesko. I remember once a German lorry broke down, and in the whole of Nowe Brzesko there was only one auto mechanic – a Jew. Somebody told them of that mechanic; I think he was a German Jew, because he spoke to them in German. I watched what he did, because it was a sensation for me too. Well, he repaired the truck, but I think they found out he was a Jew and they didn't pay him. Those are the scenes I've remembered, see.

At first, in 1941, the ghetto in Cracow was still open, you could still get out of it. And some Jews came to Nowe Brzesko on bikes – they rode along the flood walls, from Cracow to Nowe Brzesko it's 30 kilometers. And they brought gold, or something, and exchanged it for bread, for food to take back into the ghetto. There was a fire service in Nowe Brzesko – a volunteer service, not a professional one, and one of the firemen was an out-and-out dog: I know he denounced one of the Jews he caught, and shot another one dead.

And then there were constant rumors that they were resettling. Where? Where to? We still had contact with the intelligentsia, with the teachers, the borough officials, the priest's sister, so Mother knew what was going on – there was no other way of finding out. Nobody knew anything. Just rumors, rumors. Mother found out what orders were coming in from that friend of hers, and that's how we knew in advance that they were planning resettlement, because the borough office had orders to organize transportation. The farmers had to provide transportation, horses and carts, to deport the Jews. I suspect Mother was sworn to strict secrecy, absolutely banned from repeating it. Everyone thought it would be enough to go into hiding for a few days, just to stick out the campaign, and then we would be able to go back. We thought like that too, because that's how it was in Proszowice. The first time there was just a round-up, and those who managed to stay in hiding stayed there, and it was only the second time that they finished them all off [7 September 1942, deportation to Belzec death camp].

Before that the Germans had requisitioned some of our stock and taken it off to Miechow [approx. 40 km from Nowe Brzesko]. What was left, my parents split up and farmed out among various friends, so it was scattered around different places. We gave some of the stock to a teacher for safe-keeping – Filipowska, she was called. They lived out of town, down by the common. And we also had some stock with the borough secretary. Some of it we cashed in, some we exchanged for gold and jewelry, so it would be easier to stow away.

### **Going into hiding**

We went into hiding a few days ahead of the deportation. The deportation was in August or September 1942 [Editor's note: It was in September 1942]. For the first few days Mother and my sister Pola were in the parish house – the priest's sister had taken them in thinking it was a question of a short time. Of course. Father and I went into hiding with some farmers we knew, in the country, to a village called Stregoborzyce [approx. 7 km from Nowe Brzesko] – an out-of-the-way house, absolutely safe – and my youngest sister Lusia went to a family in another village, Mnichow.

And unfortunately the people who had my youngest sister... I think some other farmers must have found out they were hiding a little girl, and they got scared, and on the day of the deportation they took her straight into the Square, the youngest, Lusia. She was very clever. She went about the Square asking, begging people to open up the cubbyhole in our yard so she could hide. Nobody did. She knew Mother was in hiding and would come for her. It got out...Mother knew what was going on from the priest's sister, and she wanted to go, but the priest's sister wouldn't let her, because she said that would be the end, and she had another daughter here. I heard that later some family of German Jews took her, and they went together, and died together. Grandmother couldn't go into hiding because she was blind. In fact, she just stayed at home, because since she was blind, they didn't want to be bothered with carting her around anywhere - well, I don't know the details. I know she was shot in her own home, in the yard - I found that out after the war. They called it resettlement, deportation: that was a camouflage. It turned out that it wasn't deportation, only liquidation. And of course there were notices plastered everywhere from the word go, that hiding a Jew was punishable by death [14](#). So it was a risk.

It turned out that not far from Nowe Brzesko mass graves had been dug, somewhere in the meadows near Slomniki [approx. 25 km from Nowe Brzesko] [in August 1942 the Germans rounded up several thousand Jews from surrounding towns and villages in the meadow, and those over 60, the sick, and children, were shot. About 100 people were deported as labor; the rest in an unknown direction]. During the war the Germans set up this organization the Baudienst [Construction Service, created 1 December 1940 by an order of the General Governor and headed by Germans; recruitment was by call-up or voluntary enrollment; the recruits were barracked and uniformed] which they enlisted Polish youth in by force. They used those young boys mainly for construction work, but I found out later that they'd been brought in that time to dig those graves and cordon off the town during the deportation so that no-one got out. Quite a lot of Jews got away that time - there was no wall... But escaping is nothing, what then? I was in hiding by then, out of town, in the hayloft, and I watched. Quite a lot of Jews that had split were round and about in the fields, but no-one took them in. And, well, how long can you stay in a field. A day, two days, three days without food... They turned themselves back in to the police - after all, they didn't know that they would get killed straight off.

There were two priests in the presbytery: the parish priest and the curate. There was an orchard there, and my sister went out into the orchard and the curate noticed her. I don't want to mention names, but I know his name. He was local, came from Nowe Brzesko. He went to the priest and said, 'There's a little Jewish girl hanging around here.' Well, when he found out, there was no way that Mother and Pola could stay there. Mother knew where Father and I were. Somehow, she and Pola left the presbytery and got to us in Stregoborzyce. Before the war we'd had a big shop with a lot of customers my parents thought decent, and we paid them to keep us hidden. We didn't have anything with us, just the stock scattered around in different places.

The ones whose house we were living in were super decent people. All people we knew, otherwise the suggestion would never have been put, because it was all in the greatest conspiracy - but it wasn't the Germans we were hiding from. The Germans had done a round-up, exterminated and taken away whoever they could, but after that, unfortunately, the enemy was your neighbor. Your enemy was whoever found out, whoever tipped the Germans off. That farmer's wife was the village teacher. They had children, but I don't remember how many. They had a young nephew too, who I

think was in the Home Army [15](#), because he had a gun. He showed me how to strip a revolver. Their house was under one roof with the barn. The barn was full of crops, because the sheaves were there that hadn't been threshed. There was a hideaway made for us, sheaves arranged in a special way to make a corridor, which led to a bigger room, and that's where we stayed. We only went out at night - there was a WC so we could pee. And somehow we lived like that. But I do remember that whenever I saw a dog or a bird I wished I could be a dog or a bird. To be able to go out, fly, do anything... because I knew that just going out would mean death. Mother used to go out to the people who had our stock. One time, Filipowska told her that there were nuns going round Nowe Brzesko saying that the Jews murdered Christ and this was their divine punishment, and you shouldn't help Jews.

The people, where the four of us were, had obviously gotten cold feet or thought we weren't paying them enough. I don't remember exactly now, but it must have been 1944, because I know we'd been living there for over two years. They started... not giving us anything to eat. Nothing. Simply starving us. But because it was a barn, I used to find grains of cereal and eat them, but it was getting worse and worse. Father asked them for food, because after all, he was paying them... and the farmer beat him up. As well as in the barn, we were also living part in the loft, in this lean-to, and you could hear what they were saying, that they were pow-wow-ing on how to finish us off without making a noise. Yes. One said: 'With an ax,' another: 'With a knife,' well, it was getting desperate. There was that farmer, and his young nephew, the one from the Home Army. Who was there during that conversation I don't know - well, probably the men, though the wife must have known, because she starting abusing us too. Mother knew we had to find somewhere else right off, or they would finish us off. She went out on the pretext that she was going to bring them some more gold, because we didn't have anything on us - and that was lucky, because if we had, they'd have taken it and then murdered us.

Mother found this cottage in the same village, Stregoborzyce. A detached house, of course, a way away from any others. The people who lived there were poor as church mice. Mother told them we would reward them, that we had stock, and they agreed to us being in the loft. We moved in the night. They had children too, so the youngest ones, the little ones, didn't know, but I think the older girl did. We slept in the loft. I just slept in my clothes. We didn't have any bedclothes, we just all lay side by side. We had nothing. And when I covered myself in my overcoat, in the winter my clothes would often freeze to my face. My arms and legs were frostbitten.

One day Mother went over to the Filipowskis' to pick up some stock as usual. She couldn't take too much at once, but we had to pay our way somehow. They were never too keen to hand it over - it was obvious they'd counted on none of us surviving. At one point Mother realized they'd gone for that fireman, because they were stringing her along and not giving her anything. Instead of waiting for the stock, Mother gave them the slip - it was near the common, way out of town. She didn't get anything, but she came back to us and told us how things stood, that they wouldn't give her anything, on the contrary, they'd put the word out that she was there.

Mother couldn't go to Nowe Brzesko after that, so I used to go. It was a few kilometers, but I knew the way. I was dressed as a girl, in a dress and all... That was safer than as a boy, because I looked like a woman. In the country they used to wear these big square headscarves, so I put one of those scarves on, and all you could see was my eyes, and my nose - a peasant woman. I had my eyebrows shaved off, so you couldn't see they were black, so no-one would recognize me, and I

went to the borough secretary dressed like that a few times.

There was this teacher we knew in Wawrzenczyce, and once I went to see her. 'Child, just look at you!' – well, I never saw the sun. I asked her for bread. She didn't give me any, just bewailed my fate. I understand someone not helping. People aren't born heroes. She was afraid that if they caught me I'd let on who'd given me the bread. No, I don't hold that against her, but what I do resent are the ones that murdered for gain or hate. I don't know, do I, how I would have behaved? I definitely wouldn't have murdered anyone, but would I have stuck my neck out and helped someone when the punishment was death? But unfortunately there were some who at first informed and later murdered. Heaps of Jews in that area were murdered by pseudo-partisans there [16](#). The Kielce region is known for that.

I went to Nowe Brzesko a few times, to the borough secretary, dressed up like that, as a woman. But once I was spotted. Three boys who I'd been in 1st grade with. Obviously because we'd known each other well. And I can hear the three of them coming after me. I looked round, like. They're saying: 'It's that Mundek.' Mundek, they used to call me at school. And that saved me, because one of them said: 'We've got to see where he goes.' I pretended I hadn't noticed, I hadn't heard. I went through the Square, where the police station was, and I didn't go in anywhere, because I knew... And they were still behind me, until I got out onto the Proszowice road. When I got out of the town, as I stepped up the pace, so did they... I ran. I was very fast as a kid, but only over short distances. They chased me, and because they were mad, they started going 'Bang, bang, bang!' – pretending to shoot me. They shouted after me: 'You Yiddo!' I escaped, lost them. And so I was out of the game too – I couldn't go to Nowe Brzesko, and now it was even worse, because word got around that I was alive, in the area.

So there was only one thing for it... we found out that in the same village there was another father and son, Jews, who'd lived in Wawrzenczyce before the war. They were farmers – well, not exactly, but they lived on the land. And he, that Jewish guy, had been working for these farmers we knew, helping them out in the fields, in return for food. He had a five to six-year-old boy. Mother got in touch with him somehow, and he gave her food, because he had more food, whereas the family we were with was very poor. We gave them what we could, but in the end we couldn't even give them anything, because Mother couldn't go to Nowe Brzesko, because she'd been seen, I couldn't go either – and anyway, by then I had problems walking, because my feet were frostbitten. So Mother used to go out to that Jew and bring food back.

And one time she didn't come back. That was towards the end of the war – I don't know, maybe a month before liberation. I knew where she'd gone, and I went to see what was going off. It was night, 9 or 10 o'clock, and the farmer, or his son, said: 'Go, now! The partisans took your Mom.' The Jew who'd been staying there, and his kid, they'd been taken too, whether on the same day, hard to say. And I ran. I remember I heard shots, I hid... there were these tobacco stems, quite tall, and I ran through those stems. I got back, total despair. Mother's gone, murdered, the partisans took her. The Jew and his child murdered too. After that we couldn't give the farmers anything anymore, but they didn't throw us out, no, they didn't throw us out.

### **After the war**

In January 1945 came the liberation. I heard the big guns firing. You could hear the front. From the loft I could see the Germans firing as they retreated. And then the farmers told us that the front

had passed, that the Russians were here. No-one stopped in that village. The farmers told us they didn't want anyone to know we'd been staying with them. They were decent people.

We went back to Nowe Brzesko: me, my father, sick with tuberculosis, and one of my sisters, Pola. Mother had been killed, and my youngest sister Lusia too. We lived in one room. We found out that Father's brother Zamwel and his wife had gone right away, with the deportation, but their children, the ones the same age as me, had been in hiding. And then I also found out that apparently, during the liquidation, the butcher had taken a knife out of his boot top and stabbed one of the Germans. Our neighbors, the Kopels, a Jewish family, had hidden in the loft. They hadn't gone in response to the order, but the Germans had found them and shot them on the spot. Because they hadn't reported, but maybe that was better, because they escaped that fate – they took all of them to Slomniki. We were told that during the deportation some farmers had come with carts and others came to loot. It all went off about 5-6 in the morning. They came in carts to take the things away, because the Jews had been taken away, and just their bundles were left... So they just loaded it up onto their carts. Furniture, eiderdowns, whatever there was. There were some that suffered at the sight of how those people were behaving. Apparently it wasn't the people of Nowe Brzesko that did it, but farmers from the nearby villages. After that, my cousins were caught. They didn't bring the Germans back – apparently the Polish Navy-Blue Police [17](#) didn't want to shoot them, because they were small boys, so they gave them food with poison in it. That's what I heard.

Well, in fact there were lots of similar cases in Nowe Brzesko. Not only in Nowe Brzesko, in the area too. The Strossberg family, the one who had the grain store, they all went into hiding. One son survived, and the father. The mother and daughter were somewhere else, and they were murdered by farmers too. There's a gravestone near Proszowice. While he was alive he used to come and tend it, but he died. Unfortunately there was no way of surviving in the country. A whole lot of people would have survived if not for the gangs. And it wasn't for money, because people had nothing, but out of hate, and so they wouldn't have to give their apartments or houses back.

Another few Jews came back to Nowe Brzesko from the camps. That Zabner [one of the sons from Mr. Elbinger's grandmother's first marriage] came back from a camp, came to see if any of them had survived. But nobody had, unfortunately. And he stayed with us for two nights. We all slept in the same bed. All he had was what he was wearing and one blanket. And after that we lost touch, that's all I ever knew of him, and after that I don't know what happened to him.

One Jewish family came back to Nowe Brzesko intact: him, the wife, and two daughters. A poor family of peddlers. It turned out that they'd been taken in by a Polish family of Jehovah's Witnesses. For no money, because they had nothing. When they came back they went to live in a cottage on Krakowska Street. Before the war it had been a Jewish house, and they had two rooms on the right, and on the left lived a Polish family. When they came back, they wanted to make a living somehow, so they started making soap, using primitive methods, because after the war there was nothing to be had... I don't know whether it was envy, or what: one night, a gang burst into the house – the Jews were on the right and on the left the Polish, Christian family – and started shooting at the Poles, and injured them. Yes, afterwards they were caught, and they explained in court that they'd mixed up, that they'd wanted to shoot at the Jews. I don't know how it ended. That was 1945, and then their trial was in Cracow.

The brother of the Jew who was murdered with his little boy in Wawrzenczyce came back from a camp after the war and somehow found out where the grave was and exhumed them. To this day I don't know where Mother's buried. I don't know – somewhere out in a field, hard to say where. I don't know who killed her. But I know they did murder people there, because there were bands of partisans there. I don't know which ones. People said it was the Jedrusies [the guerilla arm of Odwet [Revenge], a local conspiratorial organization operating in the Kielce and Podkarpacie regions [south-eastern Poland] in WWII]. I don't want to generalize – there were those who saved lives, but there were some that murdered folk as well. My mother wasn't murdered by the Germans, but in the countryside by pseudo-partisans.

After the war, all sorts of unpleasant things carried on happening in that town. It was like a continuation of the war. Anti-Semitism was strong and Jews were murdered after the war, which is sad to say now, but that's how it was. After the war there was a general tendency to say that everybody fought against Hitler and everybody saved the Jews, but unfortunately things were different in reality. And it's not what people here in Poland say, that the Jews have taken umbrage because Poles didn't help. There's no offense that people didn't help. The offense is that there were some, not many, maybe, but active, who murdered 1, 2, 3 people. One bad person can do 1,000 times more damage than 100 good people. Of course it's true that some Jews generalize, that all Poles were anti-Semitic, which isn't true, because if they were, then no-one would have survived.

In Nowe Brzesko I went round to the Lipnickis', who we had rented a house from before the war. Grandmother Lipnicka told me this story. In the summer of 1944, toward the end of the war, the Germans were passing through Nowe Brzesko toward Cracow, and they were shot at [on 27 July 1944 Wehrmacht detachments traveling from Koszyce to Cracow were attacked by a partisan detachment of the Home Army. In revenge the Germans took 20 hostages and bombarded the town repeatedly]. Nobody was killed – just a game, and the driver gave it some gas, but then the Germans sent a plane. I remember that plane, because I watched it circling over Nowe Brzesko through a hole in the loft, and every so often an explosion, because it dropped a few bombs. That woman Lipnicka told me that no houses had been destroyed, but one of the bombs had hit the cubbyhole in our yard and it had burnt down. One of the bombs, as it splintered, sliced the head off the statue of the Virgin Mary in the Square. Yes, an obvious thing, a matter of plaster, but I remember how that Lipnicka explained to me why it happened: the Virgin Mary sacrificed herself, gave her head to save Nowe Brzesko. You hear things like that today on Radio Maryja [a Polish nationalist Catholic radio station run by Redemptorist monks, known for its anti-Semitic sentiments], but I heard that back in 1945.

### **Children's home**

It was terrifying after the war. All the Jews moved away from Nowe Brzesko, because – well, if there'd already been an attack and it was only because of a blunder that a whole Jewish family hadn't been wiped out, because they'd gone left off the entrance instead of right... In any case, Father decided we had to flee too. He went to Cracow and found out that there was this children's home on Dluga Street, and he put me and my sister in it. And he moved to Cracow too. It turned out that both Father's brothers from Cracow had been killed. The only one who survived was Abraham, the son of the brother that lived on Zwierzyniecka Street. He moved to Germany, to Munich, and changed his name to Alfred. One of Moryc's daughters, Giza, survived too. She'd been

in a camp. In Cracow Father was advised to change his name, and after the war he was called Bernard. When he changed his, he changed Mother's name too, to Rozalia.

I was 14 after the war. I was sick. Sick physically – I couldn't walk, I was on crutches. My knees hurt, stabbed when I walked. I had frostbite on my legs, and my arms too. And mentally I was not right either – when I saw anyone, I would run, hide, I was scared, because in the war, everybody was a deadly enemy. So after the war I still had the habit of ducking into a doorway whenever I saw anyone. I was totally retarded. I remember that the ones who came to the home from Russia [18](#) were different people altogether. Everything was just so free of terror there...

And they set up two branches of that home on Dluga Street: one in Zakopane [approx. 110 km south of Cracow] and one in Rabka [approx. 70 km south of Cracow]. The one in Zakopane was called a preventorium, children generally ailing, like me, like my sister. She didn't have frostbite like me, but she was just generally weak. The one in Rabka was a sanatorium, for ones that were at risk of tuberculosis, those with sicknesses of the lungs. Me and my sister were sent to Zakopane. I spent almost all of 1945 in that children's home in Zakopane. It was wonderful there. I could study, I developed to way above my age, and after that year I graduated from 5th grade. We went on these special courses, because I had no idea about, say, geography or biology. I could read and count and that was it.

Again it's sad to say, but one day the children's home in Rabka was attacked. They don't know who – some band. After the war there were armed gangs [19](#), scores of them, like 'Ogien's' band [pseudonym meaning 'fire', real name Jozef Kuras (1915-1947), commandant of an anti-communist partisan band in the highland Podhale region of southern Poland; after WWII, his division, 'Blyskawica' [lightning] did not disarm]. And a battle broke out. They didn't take the house, but the battle went on for several hours through the night. There was this Russky officer, a Polish Jew, only he'd been in the Soviet Army in the war, and he led that whole defense. Some of the children were familiar with guns because they'd been with the partisans in the war or whatever, so they passed up the ammunition. Straight away, the next day or the day after, they abandoned the house in Rabka and moved all the children to us in Zakopane. And it was the children who told me about it. After the war all children's homes were under guard. They were all armed. Jews who'd been in the Polish army – the Russian one [the Polish army formed in the USSR in 1943, 1st Infantry Division] – or in the Russian army, were redeployed. Wherever there were Jews living there was a guard.

We had it good in Zakopane, because the Americans sent aid: UNRRA [20](#), Joint [21](#) and some other organizations – I don't know which. So we had clothes. We wore clogs, shoes with wooden soles, but yes, there was food. We ate all sorts of tinned food, and we were even lucky enough to have chocolate – but we, as children do, wanted ice-cream, so we used to sell the chocolate in the shop so we could buy ice-creams.

At the children's home in Zakopane I used to illustrate the classroom newspaper. I drew well, but only copying, really. I could look at someone and draw them, I could look at a landscape and draw it. The odd basic thing from memory too, but there was one guy with me in Zakopane who was phenomenal. Literally. There were movement classes for the girls, and there was a piano, and that boy would go up to the piano afterwards and tap out any tune he'd just heard with one finger. Anything. And he knew nothing about music. And that's not all. The girls used to come up to him: 'Write in my autograph book,' or: 'Draw me a shepherd with some shepherd boys and some sheep,'

they would ask him. And he could draw anything they wanted. I couldn't do that. I don't know where he is now, because he left the children's home in Zakopane. I can't even remember his name.

From Zakopane they even sent me to Ciechocinek [one of the largest spa resorts in Poland] to take the waters, because I was still having problems walking. And there I had mud treatments, brine baths, immersions, and that helped me. I came back a different person, my pain stopped. I have a little trouble with my legs, that they get cold, with my circulation, but I've lived so many years thanks to the treatment they gave me back then. At that time, the wife of Prof. Aleksandrowicz [22](#) used to come to Zakopane from Cracow specially, to take corrective gymnastics classes. She'd been a physical education instructor before the war. Her husband was a hematologist, founder of the hematology clinic in Cracow.

I think in time Joint took over the running of that children's home. They gradually tried to move the whole Zakopane children's home out of Poland, yes, altogether. They must have put up the funds. And I was supposed to go too. I was in rather an unusual situation with having a father. Sick, it's true – he wasn't in a fit state to look after us at all, because he was in hospital and infectious. He had tuberculosis after all those experiences, and there was no question of him looking after us himself. He was in and out of hospital. They asked Father if he agreed to us emigrating but he didn't. He wanted someone to stay with him.

And more or less the whole house left the country at the end of 1945 with the intention of going to Palestine, but the English weren't letting anyone in then [23](#). There was a blockade. They left for Czechoslovakia, and from Czechoslovakia through Vienna to somewhere in France, and they're scattered all over the world, in Israel too. And so my sister and I went back to the children's home in Cracow, which was on Augustianska Street by then [Editor's note: 1 Augustianska Boczna Street]. It was a big house, there were four stories, the little ones at the top, the nursery.

I was in the oldest group. Boys and girls were separate. We were still getting food and tins from America. Even fruit that I hadn't known before the war, peaches and other things – they used to come in tins. We had excellent food for that time. The carers weren't in it for the money, see, they were homeless flotsam too. They lived in the children's home like us. There were carers who'd lost children, children who'd lost parents, and the ones took the place of the others. It was a totally family atmosphere. Some of the carers, like Misia [Emilia Leibel] and our director Dawid Erdestein, had come back from Russia. They tried to create a homely atmosphere for us. Well, some people couldn't cope... In the children's home there was this stair rail, and one of the girls, she was maybe 12 or 13, she couldn't cope, and threw herself from the stairs and was killed. After that they raised the banisters so that it wouldn't be so easy to jump over. Nobody else jumped.

Erdestein had been a prewar communist – he'd done time too. He was one of the first to start work in the children's home in Cracow. During the war he'd been in the Caucasus, in Abkhazia. He lost his wife there. He was from Kalush [now in Western Ukraine, before WWII part of Poland, in the Stanislawow province]. His father had been taken prisoner by the Russians in World War I – that had been Austria-Hungary – and he never came back. His mother took in sewing from dawn till dusk to keep the children, and Erdestein gave private lessons and studied, because he wanted to study. He dreamed of graduating in medicine. In Poland at the time that wouldn't have been possible. For one, he was a communist, and for another he was a Jew, so he went to

Czechoslovakia. While he was director of the children's home he was in the Party, but he was an absolutely honest man, crystal clean. He didn't get anything out of it. He lived in the children's home, worked for his board, and felt that he was doing his duty. He often used to have talks with us and tell us how fantastic it would be, a bright future, when socialism was built.

When he came back to Poland after the war, it turned out one of his brothers had survived too, and they met. They had an aunt in Australia, and she wrote to them saying that she was doing very well materially, and that they should go to Australia. She would keep them and all. And his brother went, but he wrote back to her saying: 'How can I go? There's a chance for us to build socialism here right now, what I've dreamed of all my life. I can't be unfaithful to that, I can't go for any amount of money, because I have a duty to help here now.' That was our director.

I had a sweetheart in the children's home, a close girlfriend, Marta Fiegner. A true blond. Me, Marta and another friend used to go on trips together. We stuck together pretty close. We were 16. She and her mother had survived – she had a mother, but she was in the children's home anyway, because no-one had anywhere to live. There were half-orphans in the children's home too, like me and my sister. Marta and her mother were from Lwow. Her father had been killed, he was an attorney. Marta wasn't in the home long. Then she and her mother went to France. We wrote each other for a while, but under communism it wasn't wise to have any contacts with the outside world or they were onto you at once, asking who and why. We lost touch.

I remember Maciek Gainthaim. He'd been a very pretty blond baby, before the war he was a model, and his photograph used to be on the cocoa tin labels. I think he was from Drogobych [a town in Ukraine approx. 60 km from Lwow, before WWII part of Poland]. He survived the war with his mother in Russia. He was a sporty type, entered fencing competitions at 'Sokol' [the Polish Gymnastics Society, founded in Cracow in 1885]. He graduated from the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy [now the AGH University of Science and Technology in Cracow] and emigrated with his mother. Now he's an engineer in Israel, at Ben Gurion airport, as far as I know.

Then there were Malwina and Zygmunt Gelbart, brother and sister. Blonds. He was older, a strong guy, he'd been a cowherd in the war – of course, nobody knew who he was. He grazed cows with some farmers. Malwina had been a maid. Before the war their father had traded in wood, he'd gone to Brazil on business and war had surprised him there, and he couldn't get back to Poland. After the war he found his son and daughter and took them back to Brazil.

After the war they started resurrecting all the Jewish institutions, all the organizations. It was only later that the communists closed them down [24](#). Masses of people had no families, no homes, and wanted to immigrate to Palestine. Kibbutzim sprang up. There was this group from Przemyska Street, where there was a kibbutz too. They hired three taxis to get to Zakopane and across the border into Czechoslovakia. Was it illegal? I don't know. Well, and they were stopped by a gang. It was 1946. They shot them all, 20-something people [Editor's note: the murder took place on 3rd May 1946 near Nowy Sacz; the victims were 13 members of Gordonia, who were fleeing to Czechoslovakia. The perpetrators were never found]. There's a common grave in the cemetery on Miodowa Street [Cracow's only active Jewish cemetery; in WWII the Germans used some of the headstones as construction material; restored by the Joint in the 1950s]. I went to the funeral; I was nosy – there were scores of people there. I remember that Dr. Bieberstein [25](#) spoke, he appealed to the authorities, to the power of the Republic, for someone to take this in hand, for someone to try

and stop what was going on. Three taxis full of young people killed. I didn't know any of them, because they were older – young people, but old enough to want to set up a kibbutz in Palestine. They went together because they wanted to be together, and there you are. Never made it.

On Estery Street there was a Jewish school where you could do two grades in one year, up to the lower standard examinations. It was a Jewish school with state school powers. The teachers had come back from Russia, Jewish women, professional teachers. Some of them from the camps. Most of the children, the ones who'd come back from Russia, were up to date, because they'd been to school in Russia, but the ones who'd been here just didn't have that general knowledge – when someone had said something to me in Zakopane about insects, exoskeletons – no way! I knew nothing. Polish was the language they taught in, but there was Yiddish and Hebrew too. And by the time it came to the lower standards I was all caught up. I took the lower standard – a delegation came from the department of education to listen in on the oral exams. There was this one funny situation, I was learning English you see, but I didn't really have a clue, but I had managed to get quite good in Yiddish. And in my English oral examination, whenever I didn't know a word in English, I put in the Yiddish word. The teacher who was examining me didn't say anything, and the guy from the education department couldn't understand a word in either language. Afterwards, the teacher said to me: 'I didn't know you could speak Yiddish so well.' She kept quiet and I passed.

Back when I was still in the children's home I went on a radio engineering course because I was very interested in technology and physics. There was this course at the ORT [26](#) in 1947 – for adults. ORT is an international vocational training organization, which existed before the war and taught Jews production skills and trades. And after the war it started up again. In 1947 I was 16 and I graduated from that course, I was a radio engineering apprentice. I wanted to earn a few groszy after that school-leaving exam. I went to work in a factory on Zulawskiego Street where they made electrical things, electrical distribution boards. Aside from that, the people from that radio engineering course opened a radio engineering co-operative on Dluga Street. And I was naïve – I remember my first job, they slapped me down. Someone brought a radio receiver in to be repaired, I took it and saw that the fuse had blown, so I put another fuse in and said: 'It's nothing.' The boss, when he heard that, said: 'If that's the way we're going to work, we won't earn enough for bread and salt! He taught me the common sense that you can't work like that, because you have to make money [Editor's note: he was hinting that they should charge over the odds for small jobs].

I was working, but I wanted to study too. In the children's home, when they saw my drawings – I remember I drew Staszic [Stanislaw, 1775-1826, a leading Polish scholar and reformer of the Enlightenment period] and other people – I could draw well, they very much wanted me to go to a specialist high school for art. Some of my friends from the children's home already went there. I didn't want to, because I thought to myself: you'd have to have some backing, some rich family or something, to have something to live on. What would I do afterwards? And anyway, I knew what real talent was, because that guy in Zakopane made me realize that compared to him I had no talent at all.

And so I went to the St. Jacek high school for people in work on Sienna Street. I could have gone to a normal school, but I wanted to be earning. And then I had to leave the children's home. There was a dormitory for young Jewish people on Estery Street and one on Dluga. I was at Dluga 38. At high school I was quite good in math, which we were taught by Prof. Bielak. In fact I had a good time there with my classmates. In math, when they had difficulty, it was always: 'Come here,

Elbinger,' because I was good at solving written problems. I used to go to religious studies classes too, out of curiosity. Of course that came in handy too, because when the others had questions – something was illogical, say, and they didn't feel they ought to ask the priest, they would ask through me, because I could always ask. One of the priests was a Jesuit, this Fr. Werner – a huge guy – and the other was Fr. Satora, he was a nice guy, played soccer with us, joked around. All the time I was working in the radio engineering co-op, in the factory on Zulawskiego, and giving lessons in math and physics, and that way I made ends meet. And there, at St. Jacek's, I did my higher standards. In 1950, I think.

After that I went to university, the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy. I dreamed of studying physics, but I didn't want to be a teacher, and that's the realistic outlook for a physics grad. So I went to the electrical engineering department, studied electrics, because I wanted to do something related to physics. That was quite a tough department – they used to say that people who didn't get into electrical engineering passed for other departments with flying colors. I was a full-time student.

When I was a student we had military studies too. Under communism this country was a bit militarized, because we were always about to fight a war with America. AGH was a technical university, so we had artillery. During the vacation they used to take us out to the training ground, to Deba Rozalin [a training ground, still in use, for armored and missile defense troops in the south-east of Poland, in Podkarpackie province], or to the training grounds in the Reclaimed Territories [27](#). There were whole towns empty there, and we had artillery training grounds in them, and did shooting. I usually operated the radio. While a student I graduated from the Institute of Artillery in Torun, I spent about three months there. Yes, everyone from my years went. Before you got your officer rank, you had to graduate from that school. And then they would give us the stars, see. I'm a lieutenant. After that, when I'd graduated, they were always calling me up on exercises, for a month at a time. They tried to persuade me to stay in the army. I couldn't, because I had my father sick. I had him to look after. Once they even tried to make me, to force me. I said no. So they said: 'Court-martial.' I said: 'OK. When there's a war,' I said, 'I'll go and defend my homeland, but at the moment, while there's not a war, I'm not leaving my sick father.'

While I was a student I was getting a maintenance grant for one, and for another I was still giving private lessons in math and physics. Father was still on my insurance; he didn't have a pension of his own because he hadn't worked since the war. He had a few pence, because he'd sold the two cottages in Nowe Brzesko and that gave him something for a while. As the son he'd inherited them after the war after his mother. He didn't get the two-story house back, although that was his by rights too. The Farmers' Mutual Aid forced their way in there, broke down the door and walked in. Without Father knowing, because we weren't living in Nowe Brzesko by then. They made it into a cereal store, and so it all sagged, because there were tons and tons... They used it and didn't pay anything. So Father went to court. You know what the courts were like under communism. He didn't win anything. The case dragged on until he died, nearly. But as long as he lived he used to go there. Still put money into it, very often mine. He'd mend the roof, because it made his heart bleed to see it going to ruin. And still they didn't pay him anything. They just treated it that since it was Jewish property it was nobody's, so they could do as they pleased with it.

At university I was a member of the Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews [28](#). It was at Dluga 38 at first, and then on Slawkowska Street. The Chairman of the SCSPJ was Wiener [Maurycy, 1906-

1990], a university law grad. He was a prewar attorney, silver-tongued, talked like an attorney. And after the war, every Jewish adult looked on young people with this kind of... friendship, that there were any children, any young people left. At that time there were still a lot of Jews in Poland. When there was a SCSJP rally in Warsaw, Wiener asked me to go to Warsaw and represent the youth section, because he wanted to show that there were still some young people. I agreed, and I went.

### Life in Communist Poland

I always read the newspapers, it's something that's stayed with me to this day. I buy them - even when I don't have time to read them - and then I throw them away. But I buy them. And back then I used to read them too. And before I went to Warsaw I read about the charges against those doctors [29](#). And it all became clear to me. They could have been traitors, right. Doctors who poisoned all of those big guns instead of treating them. But when I read the note at the end, where some woman doctor said that most of the accused were Jews, it all started to sound racist to me. If there were eminent Jews, they were Russians, not Jews - professors, generals... but suddenly some poisoners come along, and there's a note saying they're Jews. It sounded like Hitler to me. And I knew something was up.

There wasn't any of that in Poland at that time. And at that rally there was this guy Zachariasz [Szymon; 1948-1964 member of the Party Inspectorate Central Committee, the executive of the Polish United Workers' Party in power 1948-1990]. He was a member of the Central Committee, a Jew, and he gave a paper. In Jewish [Yiddish]. And he starts spouting this trash, that he takes it as read that those Jews were murderers and poisoners, that they didn't treat properly. He spoke very pretty Yiddish, forcefully, and he was always interjecting these Hebrew words: 'eymen,' that means 'amen.' And he says: 'We're not only against those doctors, we're against Israel [28](#), because Israel is a figment of Zionism, and that's capitalism, the bourgeoisie.' An important man, member of the Central Committee, and he believes in that claptrap! No, I got out of there. Left the hall. I didn't want to hear that, and I left. That told me everything. I saw that socialism was changing into racism. They tried to get me to join the Party, but I never did.

I remember that the Party [30](#) sent Erdestein, the guy who ran our children's home, to train young workers and farmers to be the new intelligentsia. He was taken away from our children's home not because he was bad, just because he was given another job. They set up these accelerated school-leaving courses on Garbarska Street, for them to graduate from high school and go to university. In my view that's the one positive thing about communism, that you could study whether you were rich or not. You got a grant, a dormitory - I was at AGH, I saw it. There were guys who would never have gone to university if it hadn't been for communism. But as for the rest, obviously - they took away freedom, everything. And later on I asked Erdestein, once he was retired - he threw his party membership back at them once he saw the way it was going, yes - 'You went to Russia - didn't you see that it wasn't a just system?' And he said, 'I saw it, but I put it down to war, that there was a war, and then you have to use desperate measures.'

After graduation I was sent to work to the Railroad Planning Office in Cracow, on Mogilska Street. I worked there for quite a long time, a little while in the planning office, and then in the projects office, where I managed my own design projects. The work on the railroads was interesting, because I could see the communist deceit when I used to go as a supervisor to Hurko-Medyka, an iron ore trans-shipment depot from Russia to Poland. There was a gantry built there, and they

tipped the ore down from the wide-gauge and loaded it into normal-gauge cars and then it was transported to Nowa Huta [the Lenin Foundry, built in 1954, the largest industrial plant in the Cracow region], and to the foundries in Silesia [the most industrialized region of Poland].

I was in a meeting, I remember, and suddenly, out of the window I saw this huge hill that had been made, all kinds of greenery was growing on it, so I asked, 'What's that big hill there?' There was this Jakubowski, who was chairing the meeting, and he signed to me to keep quiet. Later he said to me, 'Engineer, sir, that's not a hill, that's ore. We paid the Russians for it, it's in our records, but it's ore that's no use for smelting, because there's more earth in it than ore.' I came to the conclusion that I wasn't really badly off working on the railroads, but they were starting to build Nowa Huta, and I thought to myself: 'I'll go to Nowa Huta, work there a while – in industry. I was interested in the foundry itself, where the steel production, pipes, the rolling mill was, that kind of thing. I wanted to see that industry, which was so up-to-the minute for its time. Yes, I was curious.

So of course I told them my plans, filed an application for release or transfer – I can't remember. And then the boss, the director of the projects office, had me in. Engineer Domka. I say to him that it's not about the money, that I'm not trying to get anything, that I enjoyed working there – and I really did have very good relations... But I can't just carry on working like this for ever, see, I want to learn something new. And he starts explaining to me, that that office would soon be modern too. I say, 'I'm sure it will, and I wish you that... but I want it now.' And then he started on the party line, we're building socialism, this is betrayal, because I'm needed, and so on. And in this sharp tone. But I left anyway. New things are more interesting. And after that I read in the newspaper that Director Domka was arrested – the one that had given me the Stalin talk. Turns out that the railroads had all these investment projects going, and when they build new things you had to drill into the ground, do geological studies. And he'd contracted it out to some co-operative, and they'd drilled five holes, and the railroads had paid for ten, and they'd split the money. And this big Stalinist, right, went down, because he'd been mixed up in this corruption scandal – that was party people for you. That's what it was like.

I worked in the Huta foundry, but it was quite hard work, because it was day in, day out, morning to night, Sundays too, because it was all under construction. I had a gang of electricians, I was maintenance manager – it was non-stop in operation, three shifts. I worked three shifts too. The pay was out of this world. If you wrapped up a job ahead of schedule you had piles of money. But there was nowhere to spend that money. It took you an hour there and an hour back. I had night shifts, there were all sorts of emergency callouts... after a while I was absolutely exhausted. And by then I'd more or less seen everything that interested me. Anyway, I didn't have the need to earn so much because after all, I had no family, you see after the war I'd come to the conclusion that the happiest man is he who is never born. I lived with women, but I didn't want children. I had money in the bank, and I left.

And after that, well, in Poland it all started like it had in Russia, see. They started removing Jews, from the army first, and then from all sorts of institutions [31](#). At the time I was Chief Engineer in Deberol, Central Agricultural Construction. The director was a member of the Cracow Province Committee [of the Polish United Workers' Party, the communist party in Poland]. Kowalowka, his name was, and he wanted to show that he could fire Jews too. There were two of us Jews in that firm, so he fired two. He came into the room – and he was a stocky guy. I'm sitting at my desk, I had my legs crossed, and so he asks me why I'm sitting with my legs crossed? And I knew he was

looking for a pretext, so I say: 'What rules regulate how to hold my legs?' I knew it was pure provocation, so I said, 'Have the guts to say what this is all about.' And I got three months' notice. I mean, they paid me three wages but they wanted me to go at once. My immediate boss, Pankowski, soon found out. He came out in my defense fantastically, I hadn't expected that. The others too. He went to him: 'What's all this about?' – to that director – 'This is a good worker! We need him!' And the other comes straight out: 'Perhaps you're a Jew too?' And Pankowski got mad: 'What, I have to get my dick out on the desk for you, have I?' Literally – and sharper than that too. My colleagues behaved wonderfully. They wrote a letter, the whole workforce, in my defense.

In all my jobs everybody always knew that I'm a Jew and generally speaking I had good, decent relations. I never made a thing of it, never introduced myself as such, but I never hid it either, and I was left alone. If people wanted to tell Jewish jokes, they did it in my absence. I didn't have to listen to that. It was enough that sometimes you had to listen to it when you were on the move, in buses, trains. I left the job. It took me two or three months to get over it, but I had enough friends that I went elsewhere. And they welcomed me with open arms, because not all directors succumbed. It was entirely chance that I didn't emigrate then. I even tried for a while, but I was refused.

From Deberol I moved to Inwestprojekt on Swietokrzyska Street. By then I had good experience and I was supervising inspector for the Cracow province. I used to travel all over the province and supervise. I could be in the field a week, one day here, one day there. I accepted jobs, inspected, signed invoices. People occasionally tried to bribe me. I understood that the contractors wanted to have something out of it too, I know, because they all had losses sometimes... Other people took bribes. I couldn't afford to, because I knew that if I screwed up, they would nail me not only as an engineer, but also as a Jew. And it wasn't that I was so very scrupulous, but if I saw obvious things, like somebody trying to invoice me twice for the same thing because they thought I wasn't keeping tabs on it all after a while – after all, I had whole regions to supervise – then I made it clear I knew and I wouldn't stand for it. I'd say, 'I'm not a pharmacist, but I don't want to go down, and I don't want you to go down either.' There was no control over me, but there could have been. That was where I finished, in construction, that was my last full-time job.

During Martial Law [32](#) I was still working. I had a special dispensation. I was allowed to go to building sites everywhere, because building was going on: Kurdwanow [Kurdwanow Nowy; formerly a village, now a high-rise residential estate in the south of Cracow, construction began in 1980], Wola Duchacka [formerly a village, now a residential estate in the south of Cracow], and in Proszowice. When I retired I was given an apartment – two rooms – but I left it to my sister. I have a bachelor apartment.

### Recent years

I had family abroad. I had a cousin in Antwerp, in Belgium. Her mother and my mother were sisters. That's my closest family, a first cousin. She was born in Chrzanow and left as a baby. Polette, her name is, nee Weizenblum. When the Germans marched into Belgium, she and her mother fled through France towards Switzerland. Her father was killed – the Germans had already gotten onto him before that, but she and her Mom bribed the guards – there were people who smuggled Jews across the border. The Swiss didn't let Jews in. If you were already there, you were there, but they guarded the border. They even had 'J' for 'Jew' stamped in Jews' passports, apparently, so they knew they were Jews. She told me that she was in some orphanage there, and when they didn't

give them good enough food to eat, they protested, because they wanted better food. The Jews in Switzerland survived differently to here. And there she met her husband, who came from Silesia somewhere and was called Sznur. They had two daughters and a son. That family is religious, but like in our home, none of them have beards, but they go to synagogue on Saturdays and don't work.

My cousin Alfred [Abraham] from my father's side lived in Munich and had a shop selling watches. He married, but doesn't have children. In Phoenix, Arizona [USA] lived Giza, the daughter of Father's other brother Moryc; she survived a camp. I met her once at that cousin's place in Germany. Her other sister Ida was a beautiful girl, beautiful. And I asked what happened to her. She had a fiance, a Pole, a Christian. She had Aryan papers and Aryan looks, as they say. She didn't go into the ghetto or into a camp. And it turned out that the parents of that guy didn't want him to marry a Jewess. His parents denounced her to stop the marriage, and the Germans shot her. In the war.

That time in Germany, I met Giza's husband. His parents had left Poland for Germany back before the war. He'd been born there, and went to school there. Later, they fled Hitler to France, and after the occupation of France he fled to America. He was young, and volunteered for the American army. And he landed with the American army in Normandy [the D-Day landings began on 6 June 1944 with the aim of opening up a second front in Western Europe]. After that they made him a translator. He could speak German perfectly – born in Germany – he could speak French perfectly, because he'd graduated from school there, and he could speak English perfectly because he'd been in America. Adler, his name was, and then he married my cousin. Giza had been through a lot herself, a lot of stress, because in America she was always going into schools to talk to the children about the Holocaust. So she had to relive it herself. She came to Cracow too, came with her children, a daughter and a son. She met up with my sister Pola, but I wasn't in Cracow at the time.

And then I took on a part-time job, as if I had too little to do. I worked in the catering co-operative 'Spolem' and supervised transformer stations, but that was a trifle for me, because I knew all that inside out. Then I took another job for the State Forestries, working in sawmills, but then I came to the conclusion that I was working for a pittance while all my friends were going to the West and earning several times more, see. And since I had that cousin of mine in Antwerp, when I was there one time I started looking around to see if I could find something there for myself. And I found this unofficial job as an electrician for a while. As a senior citizen.

When I was still working and traveling around, I often used to go to folk art fairs, look at all sorts of wood carvings, they interested me. I used to buy a bit, because I knew what. I started collecting a little and carving myself. And now I co-operate with carvers and do a bit of designing Jewish carvings, because I remember it from before the war. I draw them out what they are to carve and how. At first, while I was still carving more myself, I used to give it all away, but I could see that people were impressed. A friend came from America and I gave her this little figurine, and she gave me a pair of jeans, which was a great present back then. I do a little when I feel better and have time.

After Father's death [1972] the two-story house in Nowe Brzesko is actually mine and my sister's. I didn't use to go there much, simply because it was trauma... it brought it all back, and I just wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. And anyway, I could never get in, because after the

co-operative some tenants moved in. As soon as they saw someone coming, they locked themselves in. I went to the borough councilor. He palmed me off. I went to the police – back then it was still the militia. It turned out that they were local civil servants living there. I kept writing to them all those years, until finally, two or three years ago, they moved out. They forged registration signatures, that supposedly they'd been registered resident there. The last borough councilor never said that they were legally resident there. I thought it was another break-in. The case went to the prosecutor, but because those civil servants had been living there for so many years, the prosecutor and the courts knocked it on the head, saying it was limitation [a case cannot be brought to court after a certain time has elapsed]. And they were let off scot-free, because it took me longer than five years.

I'm not appealing the decision, I haven't the health for it. I've let it go. I had a trade, earned a living, and didn't need to live off that house. If I find someone, I'll sell it on the cheap. Just the site, because over those few dozen years they've ruined the house. It's such a wreck that it's hard to sell. The plaster's fallen off. It even ruins the look of the Square. The only former Jewish house on the Square not sold on is ours. I don't take much of an interest in it, but they're always writing to me from the council telling me that it's a hazard, that I should renovate it. Out of my pension. It's boundless cheek... and they'd never do it to anyone else, but I'm used to it. It's nothing compared to what happened during the war, when they'd take a life for a pair of boots, just to plunder something. I know what people are like. I'm not generalizing, but I've seen worse barbarity than just that kind of... thieving, isn't it. What can you say? And now of course, everything looks different in Nowe Brzesko. It's tidied up, because they've put in electricity in the meantime, maybe even mains sewerage, but as a town it looks dead. Dead.

The only organization I belong to is the Children of the Holocaust Association, and I don't want anything else, because I think that's what I need, there is where I find people with similar stories. We have meetings once a month. There are 60 people enrolled in Cracow, I think, but if 40 of them come it's a good show. It's a lot, because lately a lot of that association is falling off, and some people only signed up for the benefits – there were reductions for the trams, for medication too. I'm maybe the oldest in the group, because people older than me can't be members of that association – the condition is that you had to have been no older than 16 after the war. In general they don't know much, because most of them were babies, hidden with other people. They don't know anything and the religion doesn't interest them much. I'm an agnostic too myself, so there's no problem there.

Once, at a Children of the Holocaust meeting, Prof. Aleksandrowicz came to talk to us. Jerzy, son of Prof. Julian Aleksandrowicz [the hematologist]. He's a physician too, but a psychiatrist, and he told us that what we went through kind of enriches us, because we have a different take on things. He's a Child of the Holocaust himself. I knew him years ago, because we used to go on camp together. He's several years younger than me for first, and for second he had a full family after the war, father and mother. I say that I have to disagree with what he says, that it enriches us. I think it's the opposite, at least in my case, that what I went through more like suffocated me, because I was always inhibited, I always felt like I was treated worse, because what I went through affected my psyche. And I think that anybody who experienced that time as a child but more or less aware of things, it has to affect you like that. And none of us are 100 percent mentally in order. To different degrees. My sister's in a worse state, she even had to be in the hospital, but I don't want to talk

about that.

When communism ended [34](#), the Children of the Holocaust organized the first trip to Israel, through the main branch in Warsaw. And I went on that first trip, about 15 years ago. For ten or twelve days. We went all over Israel. We went to Yad Vashem [35](#), planted trees, went to all these museums. We went to Bethlehem, Jericho, everywhere. A different place every day. We were feted. The television interviewed us, because that was the first group of Jewish Children of the Holocaust from Poland. So we were even received in the parliament. Shevach Weiss [speaker of the Knesset 1992-1996, subsequently Israeli ambassador to Poland] was speaker of the parliament back then.

And there I had this experience out of this world. This Jew from Poland followed us wherever he could. And he was looking for someone from Myslenice [approx. 30 km south of Cracow], from Cracow. I said I was from Cracow. He was called Wulkan, and he told me this story. Before the war his brother and his family lived in Myslenice. Before deportation they'd had two small boys, babies, and they'd given the children over to the care of a Polish family. The children survived, the parents didn't. He went back, and after the war he met up with them. Later on, those two boys married. He somehow made contact with them again. He wrote to them from Holland, they wrote back, but when they found out that he lived in Israel, it all broke off. Their wives didn't want them to have any contact with their uncle because Myslenice was anti-Semitic, in fact before the war that was where Doboszynski [36](#) operated. Shops were smashed up... so it was very vicious there. And that guy Wulkan said to me: 'I didn't want to take them away from what they have. They're Christians, let them be who they want, but I wanted them to know where they came from. It was impossible.' He tried again through other people, but as soon as those wives found out that somebody was trying to get in touch with them, they blocked it. And their husbands evidently didn't want to cause any kind of marital conflicts. I tried to get in touch with them too, but I didn't get anywhere.

Two years ago, I'm in Antwerp – I've got a family I'm friends with there, the Finks. His wife comes from Cracow, she's nearly 80 now too, and I'm walking round Antwerp with her, and there's this woman walking behind us. She's speaking good Polish – from Israel. But suddenly I hear the word Wulkan – the name. I say: 'Excuse me, madam, but I knew a guy Wulkan...' and she says: 'That's my brother. He's dead now. All his life he wanted to meet up with those nephews of his, but he didn't manage it.' I don't want to get in touch with them by force, as they say; perhaps I could do it through some institution, but why disturb their peace? That brother of their father's, who so wanted them to know something about themselves, is dead now... They are engineers, they've got children, and so on. Nobody knows who they are, that they're Jewish. They've got different surnames. I know their names, but I don't want to reveal them.

Every year the Children of the Holocaust have a world rally [it hasn't been in Poland yet], which we don't usually go to, because you have to pay your own travel and the cost of your stay. Well, in Poland we don't have the kind of incomes that we can afford to go abroad for three days. But three to four years ago the world rally was in the Czech Republic, in Prague. And so we decided we'd make a trip of it, to meet up with them, because a large percentage of the Children of the Holocaust come from Poland. We booked a trip through a travel agency and to make it cheaper we didn't stay in Prague itself, but 20 km outside Prague. Well, when the organizers found out that there was a group from Poland, they had a quick whip-round and at their own cost took rooms for us in the center of Prague, in the same hotels as them. And full board, everything, they covered everything. But you don't get much out of it, because it's all in English. I don't know any English,

only the basic words.

A few years ago some lawyer called me from Switzerland and said that he was on the Wilkomirski case [Bruno Doessekker alias Benjamin Wilkomirski, in 1995 published a book called 'Bruchstücke' ('Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood').]. He's this Swiss guy who worked in a library, read all about the experiences of all these different Jews, evidently, and wrote a book – made this kind of compilation, passed it off as his childhood experiences. A total forgery. A scandal broke out. The BBC got interested, and they interviewed me, because one of the things he wrote was that he'd been in our children's home in Cracow, that they didn't have anything to eat, that he had to beg. What hunger? What begging? I told them in the interview that it was a pack of lies. I was speaking to the lawyer in German, and suddenly he asks if I know Marta nee Fiegner and what would I say to getting in touch with her? Well, I burst into tears... 'Well, I would be happy, she was a very close friend of mine,' I said.

Turns out that Marta went to university in France. Her mother married again, a Swiss guy, and Marta used to go and visit her. And once, by chance, she met Wilkomirski, in some train somewhere. She told him of her experiences in the children's home in Cracow, and that's how they found their way into his book. The lawyer gave Marta my address and telephone number, and we got in touch through him. 'Why didn't I stay in Cracow? Cracow is so dear to me,' she said. She married a non-Jew, a Frenchman. They have a house near Paris. They have a son, a philosophy grad. She's a bit of a writer, writes poems a bit, had some book published. And she went to Lwow. She and her husband went on a trip to Lwow. She hasn't been to Cracow yet. I invite her, and she desperately wants me to go to see them. I promise her I will, and I want to go..., and I must, because she calls me and we talk half a hour and more. It would be easiest for me to go while I'm visiting my cousin, but I'm always in Belgium for such a short time...

In 2005 it was the 60th anniversary of the founding of the children's home I was in after the war. It's still there today, but now it's a state children's home [Care and Educational Complex No. 2]. Even in my day it was mixed, there were Jewish and Polish children, because the Jewish children gradually went back home, found their families, or found someone from their family abroad. It varied. Now it's a small children's home, apparently there are only 30 children in it, and they're supposed to be closing it down this year. The celebrations were amazing, the works – the education department must have financed it. There was a reception, excellent food, a singing performance by Wojcicki [Jacek; Cracow actor and singer], him from Piwnica [Piwnica Pod Baranami, a Cracow satirical cabaret club founded in 1956]. Several generations came – it was packed. There was a small group of Jews too. I was the oldest, there was Marek Boim too, and this guy Cezary came too, who'd immigrated to Israel as a young boy and graduated there. Some long-serving carer talked about the history of the children's home. Then the organizers wanted the former children to say something. My friends forced me to speak, because I really was the oldest child there. So I told a few stories, what the beginnings were like, from A to Z, that for us the children's home was great. Nowadays the carers are pedagogues, it's their job, but with us it was different. They, the carers, had lost children, we'd lost parents, and it was one big family.

I'm the youngest of all us cousins [Editor's note: Mr. Elbinger's sister is a year younger than him]. Giza is blind, and now she's got Alzheimer's and doesn't remember anything. She has a good husband, but he's losing his sight too, and there's no hope for it. They both live in a care home in Phoenix. Their son works in America, but their daughter married an architect in America and then

went to Israel. They're doing very well, because he has an architectural design office and does jobs all over the world.

Polette has Parkinson's a little now. She's nearly 80. Her husband died. The first time I went to Belgium, when her friends found out that I'm from Cracow, it turned out that this one is from Cracow, that one is from Cracow – there were more Cracow people there than there are Jews in Cracow. In fact when I'm in Belgium now, I go to the synagogue, but not to pray, only to find things out, because I have a gap in my knowledge. The rabbi of that progressive community is wise, an enlightened man altogether. He knows over a dozen languages.

I just went to Belgium, for a bar mitzvah. Polette's son has six children, five of them sons, and another little one's just been born. He married a girl from New York, from a family of Hungarian Jews. Polette's grandchildren are very musically talented. The sons sing – one even composes, the daughter sings, the father sings too. Mendi, whose bar mitzvah it was, as well as the party, had a concert organized for him by his brothers. They are religious, so the sexes were separate. The men danced separately and the women separately, but of course the screen was only a cloth one. His friends are religious, so everyone was in black suits, and the dances... They danced, all sorts of acrobatics, because it's developing, Hasidic dancing. It went on till one in the morning, and I couldn't tear myself away, even though I'm old and I didn't feel well, but a concert like that, and music like that, I don't remember for years, and of course I sat there till the end. It was all filmed, and recently when I was at a Children of the Holocaust meeting, I told them I just came back from this party, and that when the film's ready – and it's apparently going to be 1½ hours long – I'll show it to them, how it is, because since the war, no-one in Poland – maybe right after the war there were bar mitzvahs, but that was decades ago.

## Glossary

### **1 Children of the Holocaust Association**

a social organization whose members were persecuted during the Nazi occupation due to their Jewish identity, and who were no more than 13 years old in 1939, or were born during the war. The Association was founded in 1991. Its purpose is to provide mutual support (psychological assistance; help in searching for family members), and to educate the public. The group organizes seminars, publishes a bulletin as well as books (several volumes of memoirs: "Children of the Holocaust Speak..."). The Association has now almost 800 members; there are sections in Warsaw, Wroclaw, Cracow and Gdansk.

### **2 Pilsudski, Jozef (1867-1935)**

Polish activist in the independence cause, politician, statesman, marshal. With regard to the cause of Polish independence he represented the pro-Austrian current, which believed that the Polish state would be reconstructed with the assistance of Austria-Hungary. When Poland regained its independence in January 1919, he was elected Head of State by the Legislative Sejm. In March 1920 he was nominated marshal, and until December 1922 he held the positions of Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army. After the murder of the president, Gabriel Narutowicz, he resigned from all his posts and withdrew from politics. He returned in 1926 in a political coup. He refused the presidency offered to him, and in the new government held the posts of war

minister and general inspector of the armed forces. He was prime minister twice, from 1926-1928 and in 1930. He worked to create a system of national security by concluding bilateral non-aggression pacts with the USSR (1932) and Germany (1934). He sought opportunities to conclude firm alliances with France and Britain. In 1932 owing to his deteriorating health, Piłsudski resigned from his functions. He was buried in the Crypt of Honor in Wawel Cathedral in the Royal Castle in Cracow.

### **3 Partitions of Poland (1772-1795)**

Three divisions of the Polish lands, in 1772, 1793 and 1795 by the neighboring powers: Russia, Austria and Prussia. Under the first partition Russia occupied the lands east of the Dzwina, Drua and Dnieper, a total of 92,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1.3 million. Austria took the southern part of the Cracow and Sandomierz provinces, the Oświęcim and Zator principalities, the Ruthenian province (except for the Chelm lands) and part of the Belz province, a total of 83,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 2.6 million. Prussia annexed Warmia, the Pomerania, Malbork and Chełmno provinces (except for Gdańsk and Toruń) and the lands along the Notec river and Gopło lake, altogether 36,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 580,000 souls. The second partition was carried out by Prussia and Russia. Prussia occupied the Poznań, Kalisz, Gniezno, Sieradz, Leczyca, Inowrocław, Brzesc Kujawski and Płock provinces, the Dobrzyn lands, parts of the Rawa and Masovia provinces, and Toruń and Gdańsk, a total of 58,000 km<sup>2</sup> and over a million inhabitants. Russia took the Ukrainian and Belarus lands east of the Druja-Pinsk-Zbrucz line, altogether 280,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 3 million inhabitants. Under the third partition Russia obtained the rest of the Lithuanian, Belarus and Ukrainian lands east of the Bug and the Nemirov-Grodno line, a total area of 120,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 1.2 million inhabitants. The Prussians took the remainder of Podlasie and Mazovia, Warsaw, and parts of Samogitia and Małopolska, 55,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1 million. Austria annexed Cracow and the part of Małopolska between the Pilica, Vistula and Bug, and part of Podlasie and Masovia, a total surface area of 47,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1.2 million.

### **4 Galicia**

Informal name for the lands of the former Polish Republic under Habsburg rule (1772-1918), derived from the official name bestowed on these lands by Austria: the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria. From 1815 the lands west of the river San (including Kraków) began by common consent to be called Western Galicia, and the remaining part (including Lemberg), with its dominant Ukrainian population Eastern Galicia. Galicia was agricultural territory, an economically backward region. Its villages were poor and overcrowded (hence the term 'Galician misery'), which, given the low level of industrial development (on the whole processing of agricultural and crude-oil based products) prompted mass economic emigration from the 1890s; mainly to the Americas. After 1918 the name Eastern Małopolska for Eastern Galicia was popularized in Poland, but Ukrainians called it Western Ukraine.

### **5 Kristallnacht**

Nazi anti-Jewish outrage on the night of 10th November 1938. It was officially provoked by the assassination of Ernst vom Rath, third secretary of the German embassy in Paris two days earlier by a Polish Jew named Herschel Grynszpan. Following the Germans' engineered atmosphere of tension, widespread attacks on Jews, Jewish property and synagogues took place throughout

Germany and Austria. Shops were destroyed, warehouses, dwellings and synagogues were set on fire or otherwise destroyed. Many windows were broken and the action therefore became known as Kristallnacht (crystal night). At least 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps in Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Dachau. Though the German government attempted to present it as a spontaneous protest and punishment on the part of the Aryan, i.e. non-Jewish population, it was, in fact, carried out by order of the Nazi leaders.

## **6 Zionist parties in Poland**

All the programs of the Zionist parties, active in Poland in the interwar period, were characterized by their common aims of striving to establish a permanent home for the Jews in Palestine, to revive the Hebrew language, and to further political activity among the Jews (general Zionist program). They also worked to improve the lot of the Jews in Poland, and therefore ran at the Polish elections. In the Sejm (Polish Parliament) Zionist parties gained 32 of the total 47 seats won by the Jewish parties in 1922. Poalei Zion, founded in 1906, and divided in 1920 into Left Poalei Zion and Right Poalei Zion, represented left-wing views. Mizrachi, founded in 1902, united religious Zionists with a conservative social program. The Zionist Organization in Poland advocated a liberal program. Hitakhdut (Zionist Labor Party), established in 1920, combined a nationalist ideology with a socialist one. The Union of Zionist Revisionists, set up in 1925 by Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky, sought the expansion of its own military structures and the achievement of the Zionist movement's aims by force. The majority of these parties were members of the World Zionist Organization, an institution co-ordinating the Zionist movement founded in 1897 in Basel. The most important Zionist newspapers in Poland included: Hatsefira, Haint, Der Moment and Nasz Preglad (Our Review).

## **7 Keren Kayemet Leisrael (K**

K.L.): Jewish National Fund (JNF) founded in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel. From its inception, the JNF was charged with the task of fundraising in Jewish communities for the purpose of purchasing land in the Land of Israel to create a homeland for the Jewish people. After 1948 the fund was used to improve and afforest the territories gained. Every Jewish family that wished to help the cause had a JNF money box, called the 'blue box'. In Poland the JNF was active in two periods, 1919-1939 and 1945-1950. In preparing its colonization campaign, Keren Kayemet le-Israel collaborated with the Jewish Agency and Keren Hayesod.

## **8 Keren Hayesod**

Set up in London in 1920 by the World Zionist Organization to collect financial aid for the emigration of Jews to Palestine. The money came from contributions by Jewish communities from all over the world. The funds collected were transferred to support immigrants and the Jewish colonization of Palestine. Keren Hayesod operated in Poland in 1922-1939 and 1947-1950.

## **9 Economic boycott of the Jews**

campaign designed to eliminate the Jews from economic life, in particular from trade. It consisted not only in propaganda calling for boycotts of Jewish tradesmen and craftsmen, but also in exclusion of Jews from merchant and industrial associations, refusals to grant credit, pickets

outside Jewish stores, attacks on shops, stalls and workshops, and harassment of customers. The call for economic boycotts of the Jews first surfaced toward the end of the 19th century in Galicia in articles by Fr. Stojalowski. From 1907 it became a permanent element of the propaganda of the National Democracy movement. After 1935 anti-Jewish boycotts spread radically and became aggressive, often sparking off pogroms, such as in Przytyk. As a rule, boycotts were usually organized by nationalist organizations. In 1936 the minister of internal affairs, Slawoj Skladkowski, approved an economic boycott, while, however, condemning violence against Jews. This approval was justified by the claim that Poland was over-populated, that the peasant classes needed emancipation, and that Polish commerce needed protecting from foreign domination. The economic boycott hit small traders and entrepreneurs hardest.

## **10 Flight eastwards, 1939**

From the moment of the German attack on Poland on 1st September 1939, Poles began to flee from areas in immediate danger of invasion to the eastern territories, which gave the impression of being safer. When in the wake of the Soviet aggression (17th September) Poland was divided into Soviet and German-occupied zones, hundreds of thousands of refugees from central and western Poland found themselves in the Soviet zone, and more continued to arrive, often waiting weeks for permits to cross the border. The majority of those fleeing the German occupation were Jews. The status of the refugees was different to that of locals: they were treated as dubious elements. During the passport campaign (the issue of passports, i.e. ID, to the new USSR – formerly Polish – citizens) of spring 1940, refugees were issued with documents bearing the proviso that they were prohibited from settling within 100 km of the border. At the end of June 1940 the Soviet authorities launched a vast deportation campaign, during which 82,000 refugees were transported deep into the Soviet Union, mainly to the Novosibirsk and Archangelsk districts. 84% of those deported in that campaign were Jews, and 11% Poles. The deportees were subjected to harsh physical labor. Paradoxically, for the Jews, exile proved their salvation: a year later, when the Soviet Union's western border areas were occupied by the Germans, those Jews who had managed to stay put, perished in the Holocaust.

## **11 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).

## **12 Podgorze Ghetto**

There were approximately 60,000 Jews living in Cracow in 1939; after the city was seized by the Germans, mass persecutions began. The Jews were ordered to leave the city in April; approx. 15,000 received permission to stay in the city. A ghetto was created in the Podgorze district on 21st March 1941. Approx. 8,000 people from suburban regions were resettled there in the fall. There were three hospitals, orphanages, old people's homes, several synagogues and one

pharmacy directed by a Pole operating in the ghetto. Illegal Jewish organizations began operating in 1940. An attack on German officers in the Cyganeria club took place on 22nd December 1942. Mass extermination began in 1942 – 14,000 inhabitants were deported to Belzec, many were murdered on the spot. The ghetto, diminished in size, was divided into two parts: A, for those who worked, and B, for those who did not work. The ghetto was liquidated in March 1943. The inhabitants of part A were deported to the camp in Plaszow and those of part B to Auschwitz. Approximately 3,000 Jews returned to Cracow after the war.

### **13 Zbaszyn Camp**

From October 1938 until the spring of 1939 there was a camp in Zbaszyn for Polish Jews resettled from the Third Reich. The German government, anticipating the act passed by the Polish Sejm (Parliament) depriving people who had been out of the country for more than 5 years of their citizenship, deported over 20,000 Polish Jews, some 6,000 of whom were sent to Zbaszyn. As the Polish border police did not want to let them into Poland, these people were trapped in the strip of no-man's land, without shelter, water or food. After a few days they were resettled to a temporary camp on the Polish side, where they spent several months. Jewish communities in Poland organized aid for the victims; families took in relatives, and Joint also provided assistance.

### **14 Penalty for helping Jews**

on 15th October 1941 the governor general Hans Frank issued a decree on the death penalty for Jews leaving the designated living areas, and for people who knowingly aided them. The decree was reissued and amended by governors of each district of the General Government, who specified what aid for Jews meant: it included not only feeding and providing accommodation, but also transporting, trading with them, etc. The death penalty was widely executed only a year after the decree was issued. The responsibility for hiding Jews was placed not only on the owners of a property, but also on all persons present during the search, which was usually the family of the person who was hiding Jews. Especially in villages, the Germans used the rule of an even broader collective responsibility, punishing also neighbors of people hiding Jews. After the war 900 people were recognized to have died for having helped Jews.

### **15 Home Army (Armia Krajowa - AK)**

conspiratorial military organization, part of the Polish armed forces operating within Polish territory (within pre-1 September 1939 borders) during World War II. Created on 14 February 1942, subordinate to the Supreme Commander and the Polish Government in Exile. Its mission was to regain Poland's sovereignty through armed combat and inciting to a national uprising. In 1943 the AK had over 300,000 members. AK units organized diversion, sabotage, revenge and partisan campaigns. Its military intelligence was highly successful. On 19th January 1945 the AK was disbanded on the order of its commander, but some of its members continued their independence activities throughout 1945-47. In 1944-45 tens of thousands of AK soldiers were exiled and interned in the USSR, in places such as Ryazan, Borovichi and Ostashkov. Soldiers of the AK continued to suffer repression in Poland until 1956; many were sentenced to death or long-term imprisonment on trumped-up charges. Directly after the war, official propaganda accused the Home Army of murdering Jews who were hiding in the forests. There is no doubt that certain AK units as well as some individuals tied to AK were in fact guilty of such acts. The scale of this

phenomenon is very difficult to determine, and has been the object of debates among historians.

### **16 Attitudes of partisans to Jews in hiding**

there is no doubt that a certain number of Jews – it is hard to establish how many – perished while in hiding in the country or in the woods by the hands of partisans or common thugs masquerading as partisans. The Jews came to see the Home Army (AK) and the National Armed Forces (NSZ) (2 Polish underground armed organizations) as guilty of many such crimes. Israeli historians have documented 120 cases of murders of Jews by partisans in Polish formations. The motives include nationalistic ideology, the desire to loot, the security of the detachment, the defense of the local population from Jews requisitioning food, and Jewish links with the communist partisans, which the independence-oriented underground was also fighting. However, it was often all too easy for the tragic situation of the Jews to be abused. On the other hand, there were many gangs of criminals that passed themselves off as or were thought to be divisions of the AK or the NSZ. In many cases, it is impossible to prove whether a group that perpetrated a crime was a member of one of the underground organizations.

### **17 Navy-Blue Police, or Polish Police of the General Governorship**

the name of the communal police which operated between 1939 and 1945 in the districts of the General Governorship. Navy-Blue police was subordinate to the order police (so-called Orpo, Ordnungspolizei). Members were forcibly employed officers of the pre-war Polish state police. Navy-Blue Policemen participated, for example, in deportations of residents, in suppressing the ‘black market,’ in isolating Jews in ghettos. Some members participated in cells of the underground state and passed on information about the functioning of the German forces.

### **18 Evacuation of Poles from the USSR**

From 1939-41 there were some 2 million citizens of the Second Polish Republic from lands annexed to the Soviet Union in the heart of the USSR (Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians). The resettlement of Poles and Jews to Poland (within its new borders) began in 1944. The process was coordinated by a political organization subordinate to the Soviet authorities, the Union of Polish Patriots (operated until July 1946). The main purpose of the resettlement was to purge Polish lands annexed to the Soviet Union during World War II of their ethnic Polish population. The campaign was accompanied by the removal of Ukrainian and Belarusian populations to the USSR. Between 1944 and 1948 some 1.5 million Poles and Jews returned to Poland with military units or under the repatriation program.

### **19 Postwar pogroms**

There are various explanations for the hostile attitude of the Poles towards the Jews who survived WWII. Factors include propaganda before the war and during the occupation, wartime moral decay and crime, fear of punishment for crimes committed against Jews during the war, conviction that the imposed communist authorities were dominated by Jews, and the issue of ownership of property left by murdered Jews (appropriated by Poles, and returning owners or their heirs wanted to reclaim it). These were often the reasons behind expulsions of Jews returning to their hometowns, attacks, and even localized pogroms. In scores of places there were anti-Jewish

demonstrations. The biggest were the pogrom in Cracow in August 1945 and the pogrom in Kielce in July 1946. Some instances of violence against Jews were part of the strategies of armed underground anti-communist groups. The ‘train campaign,’ which involved pulling Jews returning from the USSR off trains and shooting them, claimed 200 victims. Detachments of the National Armed Forces, an extreme right-wing underground organization, are believed to have been behind this. Antipathy towards repatriates was rooted in the conviction that Jews returning from Russia were being brought back to reinforce the party apparatus. Over 1,000 Jews are estimated to have been killed in postwar Poland.

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

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

## **21 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe’s liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

## **22 Aleksandrowicz, Julian (1908-1988)**

internist, hematologist. In 1933-1939 he worked in the St. Lazarus Hospital in Cracow. Took part in the 1939 September Campaign. During the war he was in the Cracow ghetto, where he was director of the hospital. In 1943 he succeeded in escaping to the “Aryan side.” From 1944 he was a physician in a detachment of the Home Army. After the war he worked in the Jagiellonian University’s Internal Diseases Clinic, subsequently in the Medical Academy. From 1952 he was head of the Medical Academy’s Hematology Clinic. Founder of the Polish Hematological Society. He introduced and popularized in Poland an awareness of environmental factors in diagnosis, prevention and treatment of leukemia, multiple sclerosis, etc. He has written many textbooks, scientific and popular science works, as well as his wartime memoirs, *Kartki z dziennika doktora Twardego* [Pages from Dr. Twardy’s Journal].

## **23 Bricha (Hebr**

escape): used to define illegal emigration of Jews from European countries to Palestine after WWII and organizational structures which made it possible. In Poland Bricha had its beginnings within Zionist organizations, in two cities independently: in Rowne (led by Eliezer Lidowski) and in Vilnius

(Aba Kowner). Toward the end of 1944, both organizations moved to Lublin and merged into one coordination. In October 1945, Isser Ben Cwi came to Poland; he was an emissary from Palestine, representative of the institution dealing with illegal immigration, Mosad le-Alija Bet, with the help of which vast numbers of volunteers were transported to Palestine. Emigration reached its apogee after the Kielce pogrom in July 1946. That was possible due to the cooperation of Bricha with Polish authorities who opened Polish borders to Jewish émigrés. It is estimated that in the years 1945–1947, 150 thousand Jews illegally left Poland.

#### **24 Liquidation of Jewish organizations after the war**

In 1948 the communist authorities in Poland began to wind up Jewish organizations, both political ones and social, cultural and welfare organizations. The reasons for this are on the one hand the increasing Stalinization of the country, which aimed to crush all forms of autonomy, and on the other the enmity of the USSR towards the new state of Israel. From mid-1948 Hebrew schools and kibbutzim in Poland began to be closed down, Hagana instructors from Israel were not admitted to the country, and representatives of Zionist parties (Hitachdut, Ikhud, Poalei Zion, Mizrachi) were eliminated from the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKZP), local committees and co-operatives. In January 1949 the Bund was merged with the CKZP Fraction of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), which was tantamount to its liquidation. In April the long-serving head of the CKZP, Adolf Berman, a Poalei Zion activist, was removed from his post. In June Szymon Zachariasz of the Fraction brought before the PZPR Central Committee a draft for the nationalization of all Jewish institutions; by spring 1950 even Jewish schools and soup kitchens had either been closed down or nationalized. Between December 1949 and February 1950 all the Zionist parties and their youth wings were dissolved. In October 1950 the CKZP merged with the Jewish Cultural Society to form the Social and Cultural Society of Jews in Poland, which from then until 1991 was the sole representative body of the Jews in Poland.

#### **25 Bieberstein, Aleksander (1889-1979)**

physician, graduate of Vienna University. Worked as an army physician, and subsequently in the Social Insurance in Cracow. During World War II he was in the Cracow ghetto, where he founded and ran the hospital for infectious diseases, and subsequently he was head of the board of the Roza Rockowa Jewish Orphans Institution. He was a prisoner in the Plaszow and Gross-Rosen camps. After the war he was head of the Health Department of the National Council in Cracow. He immigrated to Israel in 1958. In 1959 he published a book, *Zaglada Zydow w Krakowie* [The Destruction of Jews in Cracow].

#### **26 ORT**

(abbreviation for Rus. Obshchestvo Rasprostraneniya Truda sredi Yevreyev , originally meaning "Society for Manual [and Agricultural] Work [among Jews]," and later—from 1921—"Society for Spreading [Artisan and Agricultural] Work [among Jews]"') It was founded in 1880 in St. Petersburg (Russia) and originally designed to help Russian Jews. One of the problems which ORT tackled was to help the working Jewish youth and craftsmen to integrate into the industrialization. This especially had an impact on the Eastern European countries after World War I. ORT expanded during World War II, when it became a world organization with branches in France, Germany, England, America and elsewhere, in addition to former Russian territories like Poland, Lithuania and

Bessarabia. There was also an ORT network in Romania. With the aim to provide „help through work”, ORT operated employment bureaus, organizes trade schools, provided tools, machinery and materials, set up special courses for apprentices, and maintained farm schools as well as cooperative agricultural colonies and workshops.

## **27 Regained Lands**

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

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

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

## **29 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

## **30 Creation of the state of Israel**

from 1917 Palestine was a British mandate. Also in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published, which supported the idea of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Throughout the interwar period, Jews were migrating to Palestine, which caused the conflict with the local Arabs to escalate. On the other hand, British restrictions on immigration sparked increasing opposition to the mandate powers. Immediately after World War II there were increasing numbers of terrorist attacks designed to force Britain to recognize the right of the Jews to their own state. These aspirations provoked the hostile reaction of the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states. In February

1947 the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin ceded the Palestinian mandate to the UN, which took the decision to divide Palestine into a Jewish section and an Arab section and to create an independent Jewish state. On 14th May 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel. It was recognized immediately by the US and the USSR. On the following day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon attacked Israel, starting a war that continued, with intermissions, until the beginning of 1949 and ended in a truce.

### **31 Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR)**

communist party formed in Poland in December 1948 by the fusion of the PPR (Polish Workers' Party) and the PPS (Polish Socialist Party). Until 1989 it was the only party in the country; it held power, but was subordinate to the Soviet Union. After losing the elections in June 1989 it lost its monopoly. On 29th January 1990 the party was dissolved.

### **32 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.

### **33 Martial law in Poland in 1981**

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

### **34 Poland 1989**

In 1989 the communist regime in Poland finally collapsed and the process of forming a multiparty, pluralistic, democratic political system and introducing a capitalist economy began. Communist policy and the deepening economic crisis since the early 1980s had caused increasing social discontent and weariness and the radicalization of moods among Solidarity activists (Solidarity: a trade union that developed into a political party and played a key role in overthrowing communism). On 13th December 1981 the PZPR (Polish United Worker's Party) had introduced martial law (lifted on 22 June 1983). Growing economic difficulties, social moods and the strength of the opposition persuaded the national authorities to begin gradually liberalizing the political system. Changes in the USSR also influenced the policy of the PZPR. A series of strikes in April-May and August 1988, and demonstrations in many towns and cities forced the authorities to seek a compromise with the opposition. After a few months of meetings and consultations Round Table negotiations took place (6 Feb.-5 Apr. 1989) with the participation of Solidarity activists (Lech Wałęsa) and the democratic opposition (Bronisław Geremek, Jacek Kuron, Tadeusz Mazowiecki). The resolutions it passed signaled the end of the PZPR's monopoly on power and cleared the way for the overthrow of the system. In parliamentary elections (4th June 1989) the PZPR and its subordinate political groups suffered defeat. In fall 1989 a program of fundamental economic, social and ownership transformations was drawn up and in Jan. 1990 the PZPR dissolved.

### **35 Yad Vashem**

This museum, founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, honors both Holocaust martyrs and 'the Righteous Among the Nations', non-Jewish rescuers who have been recognized for their 'compassion, courage and morality'.

### **36 Doboszynski, Adam (1904-1949)**

Polish politician and writer, ideologist of Polish nationalism and activist in the National Alliance. From 1934 he was in charge of nationalist propaganda in the Cracow district: he traveled round villages and small towns organizing rallies and lectures, disseminating books and pamphlets, and setting up trade unions. On the night of 22nd June 1936, at the head of a hit squad, he attacked the town of Myslenice. The members of his squad disarmed the police station, ripped up telephone lines, broke the windows of Jewish stores on the town square, and looted their stocks, which they then burned on the square. They also attempted to set fire to the synagogue. The attack was markedly anti-Semitic and against the Polish state. The police apprehended most of the attackers. The Cracow District Court sentenced 36 defendants to prison sentences of between 6 and 20 months, but 20 of these sentences were suspended and 11 of the assailants acquitted. In the court of first instance the jury acquitted Doboszynski, which outraged public opinion. The Court of Appeal sentenced him to 3 years' imprisonment, but he was released after a year. He participated in the 1939 September Campaign, and then escaped to France and Britain. In 1946 he returned to Poland, where he was arrested in 1947 by the Security Service and charged with collaboration with Nazi Germany and the USA. He was sentenced to death and killed in Mokotow prison in Warsaw.