

Michal Warzager

Michal Warzager

Legnica

Poland

Interviewer: Jakub Rajchman

Date of interview: July 2004

Mr. Warzager is 84 years old and comes from a small village in eastern Poland. During our meetings in his little apartment in the center of Legnica he described what it was like growing up in the country, where the only other Jews were his numerous relatives living in a few different households. He also related the extremely interesting story of his experiences during the war, which led him from St. Petersburg to Legnica by way of the far reaches of Siberia. He currently lives in Legnica and assists the local Jewish community with its weekly Sabbath observances.

My name is Michal Warzager. I used to have a Jewish name – Icek – but after the war I changed it to Michal. I was born on 15th June 1920, in the village of Pogranicze in the Chelm district of Lublin province. My whole family lived there. My parents had a sort of garden, no big fields or anything. My father's name was Jehide Warzager, and my mother's was Elke; her maiden name was Szwarc. My father was a tailor, and mother sometimes helped him. I had three brothers: The oldest was Chaim, born in 1910; then there was me; then came Nute, who was born in 1921; and the youngest was Matysek, who was born around 1931 or 1932. Matysek had a twin brother, but he died as an infant.

My father's family was from Chelm, and I remember my grandparents. My grandfather – my father's father, that is – was about 90, I reckon. He was paralyzed from the waist down and couldn't walk. I saw him a couple of times, when I was going to cheder in Chelm. I don't know what line of work my grandfather was in before that, or what his first name was. I was there once with my parents, when they drove the cart to the market, and remember seeing him lying on the bed as white as a dove. He had a separate room, with nothing in it but a table and the bed. My grandparents lived with my father's brother – his name was Szulem, and his wife's name was Szosza. They helped him a bit with eating, but he could move his arms, so he didn't need too much help. I don't know how they managed when he needed to go downstairs, to use the toilet, for instance – evidently they worked it out somehow. They took good care of him: they respected him, and it was always spic-and-span – even cleaner than in a hospital nowadays, and I know what I'm talking about, since I'm in the hospital pretty often.

His wife, my grandmother, was quite a tall woman. I don't remember what her first name was – maybe Salome, but I didn't pay much attention to things like that at the time. She came to visit us for the summer once. We would go to the woods together – sometimes we'd sit in the woods or the meadows and just while away the time. Then she felt homesick and said she wanted to go home. We had horses by then, and my father drove his mother back to Chelm.

Uncle Szulem, my father's brother, and Aunt Szosza had three sons, who were jailed for being communists. I remember they once gave me a book to take home and read. I didn't know what it

was. And as soon as my father saw it, he threw it in the fire. He was scared, because they were already locking up communists then.

We would visit those relatives when we drove the horse-cart to the market every Tuesday and Friday; there weren't any shops in our village yet. Before we got horses, I remember going there on foot – and it was 18 kilometers away. That wasn't a problem, though, when we were young and strong – it was just a walk, and in the evening a walk back. And there were places to stop by in Chelm, to have tea and a rest. My uncle was a baker: he baked and sold bread. Nowadays you wouldn't be allowed to sell bread in a place like that – it was a sort of half-cellar, but all painted and decorated, and nobody made trouble for him. In those days not too many of us Jews were in that line of business, because it was very hard work. Those relatives were a pretty religious family; they went to the synagogue in Chelm. My father took me there once. Now that was a real synagogue, a temple: all gleaming and glittering – what a pretty place, with a big balcony where the women sat.

My father had some other brothers too – four or five of them, I think – but they immigrated to America when they were quite young, and we didn't have any contact with them.

My mother's whole family lived in our village. Everybody lived in a ring – five houses next to each other sharing one courtyard. The Germans would insult us, saying we lived in Warsaw – that our courtyard was Warsaw, I mean, a separate set of buildings like a town unto itself. My mother's father died early on; I didn't know him at all. All I know is his name was Matys, Matys Szwarc – that was on the nameplate on the door. I don't know my grandmother's name, but I remember her. I remember that she lived with her daughter – my mother's sister Kejle and her husband Dawid. Dawid was a shoemaker, but there wasn't much work for him in the village, just some patching to do sometimes. My grandmother died when she was 85 – that was later, when I was working at the concrete factory in another village called Udalec. I came home one Saturday and she was still alive; then on Monday she died. We took her by cart to another town 12 kilometers away where there was a Jewish cemetery, and that's where she was buried.

Kejle and Dawid had two sons – one was Szlojme and the other was named Jonakin. My mother also had two other siblings: a sister named Rachela and a brother named Szmyje, and they and their families all lived on that same courtyard. Rachela's husband was named Pinio Leiserowicz. Uncle Pinio was a horse trader. He traveled all over Poland buying and selling them. His wife, Aunt Rachela, did a bit of sewing. Uncle Szmyje's wife was named Chaja. They had two daughters: Pejro and Etke. Then there was my godfather from my bar mitzvah – Mojsze. [Note the overlapping of two cultures: Polish Catholic and Jewish. The witness at a bar mitzvah ceremony plays a role similar to that of a godfather in a Catholic baptism.] I don't think he was related to us, or maybe he was a distant cousin on my father's side. He was very tall and handsome, and I remember every Chanukkah he would give me 50 groszy. He lived in a village called Kroczyn, about a kilometer from us.

I remember my father very well. He was tall and had a long beard. He also had a lot of wrinkles – I reckon that's a family trait, because I have them too. But when he laughed you could see he still had all his teeth, even though he was 65 years old by then. I used to know exactly when he was born, but I've forgotten. My father was very religious – he prayed all the time. He'd get up – he always got up early – and put on his tallit and prayed, even on weekdays, not only on Sabbath. And he always wore a yarmulka – a velvet one he'd made for himself – and he made us wear one too.

The Poles would stare at us, because it was so hot and there we were with our heads covered. I remember it like it was yesterday, how I had to wear a yarmulka day and night, as the saying goes. My father also had long payes and sometimes I'd trim them a little for him, when he asked me to.

During World War I he was in the Russian army – he showed me the Russian passport he had. He talked about how bad the situation with food was, how hungry they were. They used to catch rats and cook them, and they ate cats too. He never finished school and didn't know Polish. I taught him to sign his name, so that he'd know how if he needed to. He knew how to pray in Hebrew, and could read and write Yiddish, but didn't know any Polish at all. He worked at home – he had a Singer sewing machine. People would bring him trousers to sew, or sometimes whole outfits, or warm lined winter coats. He did good work.

My mother was short and had black hair. Black and thick, like a real Jew. She'd help father sew a bit, and did woman's work, in the garden and around the house. She didn't wear a wig, but always wore a headscarf. She did everything around the house, and took care of the animals – feeding and watering the cows, ducks and chickens. And in the garden she tended the vegetables that we ate later for dinner. And if there wasn't much to do, then in the evening she would meet up with the family and sometimes with other neighbors. They'd chat; sometimes someone would bring along a book and read aloud in Yiddish. Mother was illiterate, she couldn't read or write in Polish or Yiddish, but she liked to listen to someone reading.

My older brother, Chaim, was born in 1910. He was tall and slim, and I remember how he was always scratching behind his ear – he had a wart there or something. He learned tailoring and that's the line of work he was in. He didn't go to school, but it all came to him just like breathing – he could read and do sums, everything! He had a good head for it. Then he learned tailoring. I didn't spend much time with him, because he was already working – at home with my father, or they'd sometimes go off to some other village. One time, when he'd met a girl and went to visit her, he took me with him. Uncle Pinio went with us that time too, as a matchmaker. He did his best to make that match, but nothing came of it.

Then Chaim went off to the army. He served in Vladimir Volhynskiy, and got married there, to a girl from a Jewish family. His wife's name was Sara Fajda, and her father was a tailor. His name was Josel, but I can't remember his surname. I know he had a son too, another tailor – Aron was his name – and a daughter, but I never met her. She was in school somewhere, or maybe working. I met that family the one time I was there, for Chaim's wedding. I remember it was wintertime, and we went there by a two-horse sleigh. Father, Mother and I, and Uncle Pinio was invited too. The others stayed home, because someone had to watch the house. The wedding was in their house, in a great big room. There were maybe ten or fifteen guests all together. A big table was set up, but all the places were taken. It was pretty modest – that tailor wasn't a rich man either. There was no music – I reckon they couldn't afford it. But I remember the rabbi was there, and he took charge of everything.

They made a chuppah with Poles, and walked around the groom, and set a glass down for him to smash. And I took it all in, because it was all so interesting to me. I'd never been at a wedding like that before. I remember Chaim was given a sewing machine and some dollars, but I don't recall how much because they didn't show the money to me. Right after the wedding they came to our village. They lived with us at first, and then moved to a village not far away, called Leszczany. I

visited them there sometimes. They had one son then, named Abram. That was all in 1938/1939.

My brother Nute was a year younger than me. He was a tailor too, and a good one – everyone wanted to hire him, because he did good work. He also worked with my father, so we didn't spend much time together. Sometimes he and my father would go to sew at some farmer's house. But they had problems with the food when they did that, because the farmer's wife would have to cook for them in a separate pot, since my father was so religious. Same with me – when I took some sewing to one of the farms in another village, the woman had made all different kinds of pirogis [traditional Polish ravioli] for the holidays, but she wouldn't give me any, because she didn't want a sin on her conscience. Which was fine, because I wouldn't have taken them anyway.

Nute went to school, but he didn't finish it – he went to work instead, for the son of my mother's brother, Uncle Szmyje. They didn't give him any trouble at school – things were more relaxed by then, and when he didn't want to go to school, he just didn't go. And my youngest brother, Matysek, was always running around the house. When he got bigger, my father made him some trousers with braces, and he'd run about in the courtyard. He played with other kids in the family too – they'd go racing off to the woods, to gather mushrooms or berries, supposedly; and that's how it was right up until the war.

Our apartment consisted of one room, a kitchen and a cowshed. I slept in the kitchen. Before that I slept with Father, but when I got bigger I preferred to sleep alone. There was a bed-frame, so I stuffed a mattress with some straw and set up the bed in a little recess in the kitchen. My parents slept in the main room, along with my little brother. Chaim was already living on his own, in Leszczany, and Nute slept at that cousin's – the one he was working with – and just came home for dinner. Before that, when they were still at home, we all slept on straw in the attic. It was great. There were two beds in the house, old oak ones. There was a big table and a wardrobe. And we made shelves for the kitchen – there weren't any sideboards then. It was cramped, for sure, but we fixed it up pretty nicely. We had to manage somehow, since we couldn't afford a bigger house.

Everyone else in the family had houses like that; one of Mother's sisters – Kejle – and her family even lived in a sort of daub hut. We had wooden houses, made from sturdy wood, but theirs was made of shoddy brick with branches stuck all over it, plastered on the inside and whitewashed on the outside, and we called it a daub hut. Each family also had some kind of chicken house or cowshed. Some of us had two cows, others just one – you had to have something, so as not to have to buy milk and butter. Even so, mother almost never let us use butter on our bread – we had to sell it. And instead of butter, we ate bread with oil – one of the Germans in our village had an oil press in the village. We'd buy rapeseed, pay him, and he'd make oil out of it; nice fresh oil – my, that was good! We didn't need butter – we'd spread the bread with oil and salt it, and eat it all up, just like sausage.

We were pretty poor – very poor, you might even say. We dressed in just whatever – Father would make some shirts or something, and that's what we wore. We went barefoot – no one put on shoes except on Sabbath. Father sewed a bit, and we lived off the garden – it was a kitchen garden, with potatoes, beets, and onions. The rest we bought from the local farmers. Mother made her own bread. We'd go into town every week and buy ten kilos of flour, and Mother would bake. That was always on Friday, and she'd make enough bread to last the whole week. What bread that was! Not like the stuff nowadays that's only fit to feed birds after a couple of days.

When I got home from school, I didn't sit around the house: I either had to drive the cows out, or go to the forest for brushwood. And for winter we had to dig peat, because that's what we used for fuel. There was no electricity, of course; we had a big kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling and bought kerosene from a Jew named Mojsze. He'd bring the kerosene around from the shop in little cups and we'd buy a liter, or half a liter, if we were short of money. We had to scrimp on lighting – that lamp used a lot of fuel, and before the war kerosene wasn't cheap.

When Sabbath arrived, Father would put on his best clothes – Mother would change into holiday clothes too. We'd tidy the house a bit more carefully, since all week people had been tracking dirt in. We didn't go to the shul on Friday; we had Sabbath supper at home. Mother would set out the two candles, say the prayer, and after that we'd eat. And Father would sit and pray. When it was time to stand up, we stood up, and I had to pray too. Just short prayers – about half an hour. On Saturday we went to shul, or if the weather was bad, if it was raining and we didn't go, then Father made sure we said all the prayers at home.

There was no cooking done on Saturday; at 10 in the morning we'd eat the kichl [a kind of pastry that was frequently made in Jewish homes for Sabbath] that Mother had made earlier, and we didn't make fresh coffee either, just kept it heated on the stove. Then after the prayers, Mother would open the oven and inside it there'd be soup with potatoes, bread and challah baked on Friday, and cholent. In the winter one of the neighbors would come around – a Pole – to help us on Sabbath. He was an old guy: he'd come around and keep the stove lit, so we'd have some heat. Father was very strict about not lighting anything on Sabbath, not even a cigarette. Well, he only smoked occasionally, on holy days when it's permitted, like Pesach. He'd buy a packet of tobacco and roll his own.

We always started early preparing for Pesach. Father would make wine himself, about a month before the holiday. He bought raisins in Chelm, soaked them in something and then hid it in the hay. And then I'd go rummaging around in the hay, to see if those raisins hadn't found their way there by any chance, and I'd eat them. There was a separate set of dishes just for Pesach: pots, plates, glasses, spoons, forks and knives. There wasn't much to use those knives for, but there they were. All that was kept in the attic all year, packed in straw so nothing would break, and then on the day before – Erev Pesach – we'd unpack them, wash them, and scald them as well. During the holiday I'd ask the four questions – that's a section [of the seder], and then we'd have the seder dinner that Mother had made: chicken soup with matzah-meal noodles. I always liked the soup best, and still do. All week we'd eat only Pesach food: no bread – Mother wouldn't bake any – just matzah.

They made matzah in our village. Everyone would buy flour – I remember it was always already measured out, 16 kilos each. Then they'd lay out two wide boards lengthwise, and two crosswise, and they'd ask the neighbors to help – my mother and her sisters too – and if that wasn't enough they'd ask some other girls as well. They told them how to do it – not to turn it over, just to knead it and roll it out over and over. And they'd do it, and when it was baked, there was a big basket about a meter high, almost completely filled with matzah. Then they took it to this fellow who had a machine for grinding and sifting the matzah, and that's what Mother made pancakes and noodles out of. We ate potatoes too: chicken soup, and potatoes for the main course. So we didn't miss bread – maybe just a little for a day or two, but then we got used to it. We didn't go hungry.

Sometimes Mother made potato pancakes, and we could drink tea. If there was any food leftover after Pesach, we didn't throw it out – we'd eat it with bread, since after Pesach that was allowed. It was just one week of strict discipline.

Of the other holidays, I remember Shavuot – Pentecost. Mother used to bake these crescent rolls, and we ate mostly dairy products, just like Poles on Pentecost. And on Purim there were those hamantashen – these triangular pastries – and a special dinner, and on the second day we had Yizkor and Kaddish [prayers for the dead]. But that was a relaxed holiday, not like Yom Kippur, for example. On Yom Kippur my parents fasted. There was a bigger supper than usual the evening before, and then nothing until the next evening. When I was little I was allowed to eat on Yom Kippur, but when I got a bit older I had to fast too, along with my parents. We celebrated Chanukkah as well; but we didn't have money to buy a proper candle, so we cut holes in potatoes, and made wicks from white thread, and Father would put the wick in, every day for seven days.

I started school at age seven, and I completed seven grades. Actually there was really no 7th grade, but the teacher didn't want me to have only six years. So my father would do some sewing for him now and then, and I kept going to school, just for the sake of attending – the teacher didn't really ask anything of me anymore. Sometimes he'd tell me where there were gaps in my knowledge. The school was in a neighboring village called Kroczyn. At first the school was in a farmer's house – he had a big house, with a big room, where they set up the desks and blackboard, and that's where we had classes. Later on they built a wooden schoolhouse, but they'd just barely finished it when the war started. I didn't go there – I finished school in that old schoolroom. There were – let me think – about 30 children who went to school. The Germans sent their kids there too, along with us Jews and the Poles – there were two Polish families that lived in our village, but there were more of them in other villages in the area. The school was close by for me – only a kilometer away. In the winter, when there was snow and frost, they'd take us there by sleigh. They'd harness up the horses and one of the neighbors, or sometimes my father, would take us, because the kids would catch a cold otherwise. It was cold, and we weren't used to it. Once it was so cold that we didn't go to school at all for three days. I remember it well; it was just crackling cold! In that region it didn't usually get that cold.

Most of the time at school there was no friction among the Polish, Jewish and German children. We spoke different languages – whichever one we wanted to speak. We could all speak Polish, even the German kids. They didn't want to speak Polish very much – sometimes they'd laugh and poke fun, but during recess we'd all run and play together, and they talked with us and with the Poles. They did have German accents, though. During recess we'd play a game called 'buttons': we threw buttons at the wall, and if yours hit someone else's, you won it.

I was friends with one boy – my godfather's son – named Abram. The two of us always had something to talk about. That wasn't so common with the others. There was one German girl who liked me because I could speak German well and I'd talk with her in German. That made her happy and she'd smile, and when some other boy didn't want to speak German she'd hold me up as an example. I used to try, you see, if I was talking to them, to speak German. Oh, and the Polish kids would shout out: 'Icek, come here!' Just to annoy me, you understand, calling out my name for no reason, just because my name wasn't Polish. That annoyed me back then.

The schoolteacher was a Pole. He was approachable, and he treated me and the Germans just like everyone else. And he was very courteous to us. He had a fake cigarette that looked like it was lit, but it wasn't a cigarette at all, just an imitation. The children would tell him: 'Sir, you're smoking, and we aren't allowed to!' And he'd tell us that if we ate the way he did, and then we'd be allowed to smoke too. Ah, what a lark that was – we thought it was real; it looked like a cigar.

History was my favorite subject. I even read history books at home; I was that interested. I liked to read – one book called 'Stara Basn' [An Old Legend], and various fairy tales, and I kept 'A Thousand and One Nights' under my pillow. I borrowed books from the school library. First the teacher would read books in some lessons, and if someone liked them, they could take them home. So I borrowed a lot of books and read them at home, when I got some peace and quiet.

The worst subject was math – I still have unpleasant associations with math lessons, especially the multiplication tables. Somehow I just didn't take to it, and I couldn't get it into my head. Adding and subtracting – that was just about all right, but dividing, no-how. And when the teacher was calling on people in the math lesson, I'd try to make myself inconspicuous, hiding behind someone. I had some trouble with that – well, not very bad trouble: the worst thing that happened was I got Cs. And in those days, who cared about marks – I didn't even know what the difference between a C and a B was.

Later, when I finished school, I got a certificate and I looked over my marks then. I always had an A for conduct and Cs and an occasional B in everything else. I remember I got a C in geography, and let's not talk about math. Not everyone has a knack for it; you need a good memory and I was lazy about studying. I didn't like school much, but it was required [see compulsory schooling] [1], we had to complete the 7th grade. I only played hooky once. I didn't know the teacher would tell the local community authorities, but he did, and at the end of the year a summons came, and my father was given a week in 'the cooler'. That was the punishment – not jail exactly, but a sort of lock-up, and he had to spend a whole week there. I had no idea there would be such a high price to pay – or that my father would have to pay it! People had brought sewing for him to do, and he couldn't finish it on time. But when they found out the reason, they laughed. I took food to him all week. And I got a bit of a hitting afterward. Father didn't beat us often – we had to really have it coming.

When I had completed school, I started going to cheder in Chelm – I was 14 or 15 years old, and I lived with Uncle Szulem and Aunt Szosza. I spent about six months there. I was clever, and I learned the basic prayers quickly. I know the service we hold here in Legnica nowadays practically by heart. But then my father had to bring me back home to help out.

After that I started to learn tailoring, but it didn't suit me. I liked exercise, and tailoring means you just sit there doing that back-and-forth thing with the needle. I visited the family next door quite often, where my mother's brother-in-law, the shoemaker, lived. I got to like cobbling and wanted to be a shoemaker, but my father said no. He said there were no shoemakers in our family and I wasn't going to be the first. So I gave it up. After that I did rounds with a door-to-door carpenter who put windows in. Some of the Poles and Germans were building houses and they needed someone to put in windows. But Father said that if I went around to those places I'd end up eating pork, so he said I couldn't.

In the end I wound up working for some distant relatives – I don't remember whether they were from Mother's or Father's side of the family. They had a concrete factory. Father arranged it all somehow with the oldest of them – Abram, his name was – and they took me on. That was in a village on the way to Chelm called Udalec, and there were two factories there: one Jew who made bricks, and these relatives of ours with the concrete factory. There were four of them: Abram, Motl, Acze and Pejrec. And their mother was still alive, and a daughter, their sister. I think her name was Jenta, but I don't remember the mother's. The concrete factory made sections of piping, pavement, slabs for bedding sewers, and roof tiles. I made roof tiles. It was all in one room – I had a machine for making the tiles, and the other stuff was cast in molds in the courtyard.

Three Poles worked there – one older guy and two younger ones, around 20 years old. The young ones were roughnecks – they used to hassle me, saying 'Oh, a Polish Jew' – but that's about all. The older one taught me how to make the roof tiles. Lay it down, sprinkle it with cement, splash a bit of water on it, run it twice through the machine, and it was ready. Sometimes when someone wanted some colored tiles, we made red ones. My quota was 100 tiles a week, working one eight-hour shift. I knocked off at three, and then spent about an hour cleaning the machine and the workplace, and then I was free. We worked Monday through Friday; the Poles didn't come to work on Saturdays or Sundays, but on Sundays we had to glaze the tiles, and that girl Jente would help us a bit.

The owners of the concrete factory were good people. I lived with them; I slept in the kitchen, where there were two beds. The older Polish guy – the one who taught me to operate the machine – slept in the other. Sometimes I stayed there for Sabbath. There was a shul right in their house: a big room where other Jews I didn't know came. I only knew the one who made bricks by sight, because he came there sometimes. The Sabbath preparations were like ours at home – cholent in the oven. Later on Saturday, if I wanted to, I was welcome to sit at the table with the owner and his brothers, and their mother served up the meal.

If I wanted to see my parents, I went home by bicycle – they had three bicycles and let me use one. I had to learn how to ride it first, and while I was learning I fell and hurt myself a few times. The road was about 300 meters from the factory, and they let me ride a bit there for practice. And I'm riding along faster and faster and the next thing I know I'm in a ditch – luckily it wasn't full of water. But once I'd learned how, I'd ride a bicycle home for all the holidays, and sometimes for the Sabbath. I worked there almost right up to the start of the war. About a month before the war broke out, Abram said to me: 'Don't come in tomorrow – we're leaving.' That was in August 1939, and in September it all started.

Our village was right on the road to Chelm. It wasn't paved – just a simple dirt road; everyone was used to it; they used carts or rode on horseback. More than half the farms – twenty or so – were German; only two belonged to Poles; then there were the five that belonged to us Jews. It was easy to tell the Polish farms from the German ones: the German ones were nice and tidy, everything spick-and-span, and the Polish ones were shabby. The Jewish ones all belonged to our relatives; the two closest Jewish families lived a kilometer away.

There was no shul in our village until just before the war. Before that it was in another village, called Majdanek – but not that Majdanek, a different one. [One of the Nazi death camps was located in a village called Majdanek, outside Lublin.] It was a little village. There were a few Jews

living there, and that's where we'd meet. Sometimes there were ten or twelve people. Sometimes someone would come from one of the other villages, even from 5 kilometers away. In those days that's what it was like: one Jew a kilometer away, the next Jew 2 kilometers away. It was only our family who settled down in a little cluster. The ones from elsewhere didn't always turn up, so we managed for ourselves. There were seven adults in our community. I went there with father, because he prayed there. And my godfather from my bar mitzvah ceremony would read the Torah. Going there added a bit of variety to our lives – seeing other people and chatting a bit brightened things up a bit. And when they moved the prayer room to our village, it was in our house. There was a room and an alcove, just a small space. We'd clean the room and move everything that wasn't needed out of it, and set up chairs, and people came there on Saturdays. The prayers would last about an hour and a half, and then we'd move everything back the way it was. There was a special cabinet for the Torah, and it was taken out and my godfather would read.

The closest shochet was in Dorohusk – that's on the Polish-Soviet border now [actually Polish-Ukrainian], about 8 kilometers from us. He used to come around in a cart, or else we'd go to him, usually with chickens. We'd all go together en masse, with the chickens in baskets. 8 kilometers to get there, 8 to get back – 16 kilometers all together, and it was fun, a sort of outing for us. There was a special ritual slaughterhouse there. People would drive cattle there, and the guy there did what needed to be done. He knew how to slaughter an animal the right way. After that he had to remove some of the veins – in Yiddish it's called 'treyben' – I used to watch him do it. And then it was kosher. Just the front quarters – we aren't allowed to eat the hindquarters. They'd take those away somewhere and sell them, I don't know where.

Before the fall holidays – Rosh Hashanah – the shochet used to hire a cart and go around to everyone in the nearby villages, so that his horse wouldn't get too tired. He'd start in Kroczyń – that was about a kilometer from us, and some Jews had a shop there. They were both named Mojsze – I don't remember their last names. I remember one of them had a hernia; the other was my godfather. That's where the shochet would start his rounds, and then he came to us, then to a village called Lipinki, where a few Jewish families lived. Then he'd go on from there. He did everything on the spot – he could kill a chicken in nothing flat.

The nearest mikveh was a way away, in Chelm. We'd bathe outside, in the ditches left from digging peat. They were full of water, but not too deep – about up to the armpits. You could go swimming if you knew how. It was nice clean water, and all of us boys went and splashed around every day. Father would too, before Sabbath – after all he couldn't very well make an 18-kilometer trip just to go in the mikveh; even if you had horses, it cost a lot. And in the winter Mother would heat water for each of us to have a bath in a big washtub we had. Then we'd throw out the water and pour in fresh water. That's how we bathed. As best we could, but we were made to keep ourselves clean.

The closest rabbi was also in Chelm. When we had to arrange something or get some advice, we went into Chelm. But we all lived amicably in the villages and didn't have to go very often. I remember one time my oldest brother, Chaim, had some issue. I don't know what it was all about; it was when he was still engaged. But they went to the rabbi in Vladimir, to confess or something – I don't know. Chaim told me about the rabbi's apartment – thick carpets on the floor, and the rabbi sitting at a table, and people telling him everything. I reckon he had a certain day for receiving people. But I don't recall anyone from our village going to the rabbi in Chelm.

We lived peacefully in the village – our relations with the Poles and Germans were fine. Everyone was amicable. They brought sewing work to my father; sometimes they'd get together in the evenings for a smoke and a chat. At harvest time they'd ask us to help out – they'd ask us, not make us! When they were mowing, they needed someone to make twine and to tie and stack the sheaves. And if there were two or three very dry days, they'd ride up with the horses and I'd help load the sheaves onto the wagon. After that I'd help with the threshing; I walked behind one of the horses. Four horses were harnessed to a treadmill, and I'd be behind one horse and another boy behind another. That was when someone had a thresher. If they didn't have one, they'd use flails for threshing, like one poor German I used to help. We helped because there was no way to refuse – people would have talked otherwise. There was only one German who harassed us – a forester. We'd go to the forest for brushwood, because peat was a big problem – we started digging peat later, and anyway then you had to wait for it to dry, carry it home and pay for it too. So we went to the forest for wood. We had to sneak in by a roundabout route, because that forester saw everything from his window.

We were on good terms with some Poles from another village, called Szotyski. What good people they were – I remember their name was Grygorczyk. Father did sewing for them. Their one daughter had died, and they were sad all the time. And sometimes they'd come to our house to visit, or we'd go to theirs to do some sewing. We didn't know the Poles in our village well at all. One of them was dreadfully poor; the other had a bit more land, but he was sickly and went around looking awfully thin. Oh, and there was that old man who kept cows, and who sometimes helped us. He was on his last legs. So he was neither friend nor foe – he was in bed all the time. In other villages – Majdanek, for instance – there were also some Ukrainians and Belarus. They didn't cause any problems at first either [also see Anti-Semitism in Poland in the 1930s] [2]; father sewed for them, and when I'd deliver it to them, they'd even offer me something to eat or drink. They had different holidays and different greetings, but everything was amicable.

There were some mixed families as well. I remember two families where the husband was German and the wife was Polish; one of those girls was someone I knew. And there was a scandal once, when a Jew eloped with a Polish girl. That was in our village, and the Jewish boy was one of our relatives – the son of my uncle the shoemaker. His name was Szlojme. He was already married to a Jewish girl from another village; I was even at their wedding. That was in a village called Roztoka, about 5 kilometers from us. It wasn't a grand wedding; it was rather modest. My parents didn't go to it; I suppose they were away somewhere or something – it was on a day off. Only about ten people came, but it was a proper Jewish wedding under a canopy. But he only lived with her for about a week before going back to that Polish girl – they'd been seeing each other before the wedding.

I remember the girl – she was a neighbor, part of that poor Pole's family. He had three daughters: Hela, Bronka and Gienka. Bronka was Szlojme's girl. He kept it all hush-hush – he came to the village to see his father, supposedly, but in fact he didn't go to his father's at all – he went to his lover. And then he ran away and lived secretly with the Polish girl for a while. They were living together in sin, because he didn't want to convert, and so they couldn't have a church wedding. She wasn't religious either, but her parents didn't like it – they wanted her to have a regular wedding with a priest. Later on they ran away together, no one knew where, and his wife kept searching and searching for him, until in the end she finally stopped searching. His parents acted

as if he had died [sitting Shiva] because he had renounced his heritage. I remember to this day how they recited the Kaddish, sat Shiva for seven days as if he were dead. Everyone knew all about it and there was a lot of talk.

Our relations with others started to turn bad a little while before the war. When Hitler came to power in Germany there were still no problems where we were – it wasn't until 1939 that things got bad, especially with the Germans. It all started: this is prohibited, that's prohibited – they treated us as if we were in a labor camp. That's when we started to get scared. I was beaten up twice; the second time my father rescued me – he came riding up on horseback. They still had some respect for my father, because he did sewing for them.

It was the same way with the well: somehow we happened not to have a well, and we always used to use the well that belonged to the German across the street. I was the one who always went to fetch the water. It was one of those wells with a crank. And one day I'd drawn some water and I was going my way, and suddenly Father tells me not to go back there anymore – evidently the owner had said something to him. So I went to another German, who had always been a decent fellow. He told me I could take some water, but that we had to dig our own well. So we all chipped in together and I went to the concrete factory where I'd worked and bought concrete sections to line a well with. I made two trips to bring those sections back, and we hired a man to put them in, and we had our own well. But they'd started harassing us. I remember once just before the war when my parents went to another village about 3 kilometers away – I don't remember the name of it – to do some sewing, and these two bruisers started coming around; Ukrainians. They yelled something about how they weren't going to bring any sewing to Jews. I ran to that other village and told Father that we were scared. He told us we'd be fine, they had to finish the work they were there to do. But we were afraid.

When the war broke out, I remember how soon the Poles were defeated [see September Campaign 1939] [3]. My neighbor was conscripted and the next day, lo and behold, he was back. He told me that everything had collapsed and that we had no army anymore. Some troops passed through our village, on horses of course. Some of the neighbors fed them – they boiled potatoes for them. I went and hid in the woods then with two of my brothers – the youngest one stayed in the village. At night I'd sometimes go home to get some food. It was a big wood, and there were a lot of people hiding out there, not just the three of us. That was all in 1939, before our fall holidays – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Not long after that it was announced that the Germans were coming. I don't remember exactly how it came about, but by some miracle we [Mr. Warzager and his brothers Nute and Chaim] got on a train to Russia. I don't remember whether we were forced to or not. They took us to a forest – this was in 1939 – and we worked there for about a year; then later we ran away from there and wound up in a little town called Konosha. There was a sawmill there, and I went and asked if maybe they'd hire me. They welcomed me with open arms, saying right off: 'You come work for us, you'll work hard!' And I worked there until the war [the so-called Great Patriotic War] [4].

Then one day they said there was some big news from Moscow. Everyone came out onto the sawmill grounds to listen to the director. And he said that on such and such a day – I think it was 22nd June – the Germans had launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. About a week later they started rationing food, giving out 800 grams of bread per person. The cafeteria was shut down

and never re-opened. So in the morning I'd get my 800 grams and eat it, and then wait like a hungry animal. Cold and hungry ... and it was hard work; I even got what they called 'chicken blindness' – that's what they call it when you can't see after dusk – and friends had to lead me from the sawmill to the barracks we lived in. As long as there was some kind of light I was fine, but when I went out in the dark someone had to guide me, if I had to go to the toilet or something. It was all because there was no food – from hunger, and a lack of vitamins; vitamins back then were some kind of pipe dream. Well, maybe not for everyone – the people whose hometown it was always had something: a little garden or whatever. Those people made do somehow. But I didn't have anything or anybody.

My brothers had both gone separate ways from me, and I lost touch with them. When we escaped from that work in the woods, we were still together. Then Chaim stayed in Konosha like I did, but at the other end of town; Nute went somewhere else. I never saw him again; all I know is that he worked in some clothing factory, and then he was conscripted and fought in the Battle of Stalingrad [5]. My older brother told me that – they corresponded. And all I could think about that whole time was food. Chaim managed to do better for himself in that town than I did, because he had a skill. I had to go wherever I was shoved. Later on, when I was at the front, we stopped corresponding and I lost touch with him completely. To this day I don't know what became of him.

A month or so after the start of the [Great Patriotic] war, I was summoned to the conscription office. The commission sat at a table, and they didn't ask any questions about anyone's health or anything, just declared us 'fit to serve, fit to serve, fit to serve'. There were several of us there, and they took us all. After two weeks of training we were sent off to the front. We wound up outside Leningrad – I don't remember the name of the town anymore. Later an order came through to remove all non-Russians from the front lines. There were lots of us – Poles and other nationalities. They pulled us from the front lines, and they sent us to the big food warehouses on Lake Ladoga – but we were sent there as soldiers, not as civilians. Maybe they didn't trust us – thought we'd join the Germans or something. They pulled us all out and we went to work, loading food supplies for Leningrad onto barges: different kinds of flour, groats, and rusks – I never saw any bread.

I remember I was working there in 1941 – they were gigantic warehouses, just endless. Train tracks ran through them, and they brought in supplies every day, and it was unloaded and we loaded it onto the barges. Later a new order came through, and everyone who'd been pulled from the front was sent back. And I wound up at Leningrad. The 185th independent infantry regiment – I remember exactly how I was assigned to that unit. And the liberation of Leningrad began. I remember how harsh the winter was – it must have been January or February when they broke the siege. I remember it was bitterly cold, and the snow was so deep. It was very tough going. If we'd been in the woods, we could have hidden behind trees, but this was out in the open, not even a bush – nothing grows on the water.

If I'd been in some other place maybe I would have gone into hiding somehow, but there was no way I could manage it there. And I was real brave – I took chances, because I knew my parents were already old, maybe even dead, so I thought to myself: I don't have anybody, what difference does it make if they kill me or not? You just kept on pushing forward. Who cares – when they said 'Charge!', I charged. I just stuck my head out a little, and the warrant officer – he was Jewish too – started yelling at me: was I trying to get myself killed, or what? And there was a bang and it threw

me back into the trench. I just wanted to see what was going on out there on the water. All I caught sight of was people dropping like flies and were just lying there in heaps. A fellow was alive one minute, dead the next. Later I remember some officers standing there discussing something. There were orders against gathering in groups – we had to stay separate. And these officers were standing in a group when some kind of missile hit them and blew everything to high heavens. I saw that from the trench.

It was hell, but you couldn't escape – they'd shoot you in the back if you tried. There was a special company for that – it was a secret, but we knew. They walked around with their rifles, and if someone tried to desert, they'd kill him without a trial or anything. I witnessed one incident like that, before the liberation of Leningrad. It was an Uzbek, or maybe a Tartar – he shot himself in the arm, thinking he'd get away with that somehow. But the doctors examined him and said it was self-inflicted, that he'd done it to himself. And of course they notified Moscow – they wrote to Stalin, and the reply came about two weeks later: shoot him. They had us stand in a circle – the whole unit, out in the woods. We formed a circle. And then they led him out of the dugout, and when I think back on it now, I don't know how a person could turn so black. He was as black as an African. Was it from fear, or from hunger? Maybe from hunger, since they didn't feed us well, especially not if you were a prisoner. Anyway, they gathered everyone and had us form that circle, and they led him over; one guy went up to him from behind and shot him twice in the head. The doctor came running up and felt his pulse and told them to take the body away. That's what happened. Well, but it was idiotic for that Uzbek to try that. There's no way to fool a specialist with something like that – they could tell no one had shot him, that he'd shot himself, and in the arm at that.

There was no way to approach Leningrad from any direction except from the lake [Lake Ladoga]. There were planes patrolling it, and they sank a lot of ships, and barges loaded with food, they all went down with men on board. It's a very deep lake. And then – in 1943 it must have been – we launched an offensive. It was all prepared; the artillery shot at the Germans for 50 or 60 minutes, and they thought they'd cleared everyone out of there. And the order came: 'Forward, march!' We had to forge the river at a run. There were no Germans on the river, but further on they were sitting in trenches. We gave them a beating; it's true. We all rushed out onto the river – it's pretty wide. The ice was a meter or two thick, and even tanks could cross it. I got hit out on that river – in the arm and the leg. And I thought to myself: 'So that's the end of the war for you, Warzager old chap!' I didn't know – I thought maybe I'd die or something, because I didn't know just what had happened. The orderlies found me there, and there was a dugout shelter with doctors. They bandaged me up and took me by sleigh to the field hospital. The doctor there took a look and said: 'We're going to amputate those toes.' I begged him not to, in Russian, thinking they'd somehow heal, but he didn't respond. They knocked me out and when I woke up I had no toes.

I'd also been hit in the arm, but fortunately it was only a flesh wound. They just cleaned and bandaged it. It healed quickly, but my leg just wouldn't mend. I was in the hospital for six months. It was fine there, because they fed us better, and there weren't bullets whistling past your ear all the time. When someone got out with just a wound, it was all right. Sometimes they'd amputate a leg or an arm, and there were a lot of people who'd been blinded as well, so not everyone had it real good. They counted my wounds as serious, so I had the right to wear a yellow stripe, but I didn't wear it – a wound was a wound, why should I brag that mine were serious? Later they treated me in another hospital, and as luck would have it, it was in the same place where I'd

worked at the sawmill. That was a so-called evacuation hospital – it was moved from place to place. And I ended up in Konosha, the same place where I'd worked. I wrote to my brother right away, since I knew his address. They wrote back that he'd gone away, but they didn't know where to. So I stayed in the hospital, and my leg just wouldn't heal. I'm not surprised – they didn't have any medications, or even bandages. They'd wash and sterilize old bandages.

After six months had gone by and I was somewhat better, the hospital put me to work. There were storehouses with firewood, and they told me to guard them for the time being and that later they'd figure out what to do with me. After I'd got better and could walk pretty well – as well as possible, anyway – they discharged me from the hospital. The discharge papers said: 'fit for non-combat duty'. I thought they'd give me a discharge from the army. I had nowhere to go, but still! But no, I was 'fit for non-combat duty'. I was assigned to something called the Convalescent Unit, where they sent cripples like me to continue recuperating. We didn't have any medical care anymore in that unit; I had to do everything for myself. In the hospital everything had been taken care of. Anyway, there I was in that unit, and officers would come around when they needed to reinforce their personnel. One day this major showed up and started looking everyone over as if we were cattle at a market. He looked me over and asked how old I was, what my name was and where I was from. I answered all his questions, and he told me to come with him. He picked out two other guys too – three of us all together – and took us to something called the Communications Unit. They had cars there with telegraphs in them, and there was even a woman who taught me to operate it.

I liked that unit. I was just a guard – we guarded the headquarters. There were 150 people there, counting the officers and the service personnel. There was a doctor and some nurses, and life was finally normal. We didn't live in barracks; some of the people lived in a house, and the rest of us in a sort of annex. The food was pretty good. The place we were located was called Kem. But later the fellow who had brought us to the unit told us that we'd been assigned to the far eastern front. We were taken right to the Japanese border – beyond Siberia, even – there's nothing at all out there. The guys who were there already said you could cross over to America from there without even getting your feet wet. And I served there. At first I was a sort of postman – I'd go to the post office and distribute letters and money orders. Later on they gave that job to some girl, and I was back to guarding the headquarters. I worked on shifts. In the summer we worked it out so that we didn't relieve each other every two hours, the way we did in the winter – in summer we stood guard for eight hours then had eight hours off. And that's the way we guarded those headquarters.

I read an announcement there about some organization – I don't remember what it was called, something or other in Polish – and that it was possible to go to Poland. I got my discharge from the army – I'd already served longer than I had to anyway. It was wintertime then: the winter of 1945/46. There were a few of us, and we'd been told which train we were to take. It was bitter cold, but we'd squeezed onto a step and there we stood. Our feet were freezing in those shoes – they hadn't given us winter boots [rubber boots lined with felt], only officers got those. And off we went, and there were sailors in the train as well. Not like you get here – they were real feisty. They forced the doors open and went into one of the carriages to get warm. And trouble started – the woman who was in charge of that carriage wanted to get the police, but somehow they talked her out of it. And on we went, all the way to Yaroslavl – that's ... I don't know, however many kilometers from Moscow. And as luck would have it, the train stopped in the same place our former unit had been

stationed in. That village was called Karmanovka. I'll be damned, there I was again! But we stopped there for a long time, and I knew some people there, so I went and stayed with them.

Then later that treaty was signed to evacuate Poles who wanted to return to Poland [see Evacuation of Poles from the USSR] [6]. I signed up for that – they gave us papers. That was in 1946. We spent a whole month in the train, until finally we arrived in Legnica. First they took us to Gubin – that's right on the German border, on the Oder. But when we got to the town, a whole group from the town council met us and said we could stay if we wanted to, but they warned us that there were still gangs roaming around there who might hunt for us, maybe kill us. That scared us. The engine driver – who was an old German who'd been left on the job – said he'd take us someplace else, unless we wanted to stay here. And he brought us to Legnica. He yelled: 'Aussteigen!' – 'Everybody off!' And we got out, near a little river that runs here. It was nice and warm. It must have been May, around the 9th; it was the anniversary of the liberation when we arrived in Legnica [also see Victory Day in Russia] [7]. I was with my wife by that time – we'd met in Russia – and her four-year-old daughter.

Most of my family died during the war. That Janek Grygorczuk hid them – he was such a good man, he helped us so much. He knew what would happen if he got caught, and he did it anyway. He lived in Szotyski. My relatives worked with him to build a dugout there, and that's where they hid. It was out of the way – there wasn't even a road there, just a sort of path between the fields. They stayed in that dugout part of the time, and part of the time at home. And they might have kept safe until the end of the war, because it was already 1942, which was the worst year for the Germans – they were losing everywhere by then – but someone turned them in to the Gestapo. It was a Pole who did it – I even know his name: Stanislaw Kowalski. He'd had his eye on us for a long time, even before I was born. It was something to do with sewing, and he had it in for my father. And he went to another village, called Kamien, where the Gestapo were, and drove them back hidden under sacks of flour. By a stroke of fate, my parents had something they needed to do, and had come to the house. They'd already spent the night there a few times – they made sure first that it was safe – and they were there then. Kowalski must have been watching them, because he knew they were there. And the Gestapo shot everyone with machine guns.

My youngest brother, Matys, had been hiding at a neighbor's house – a German communist – grazing his cows. And sometimes he went home for dinner. And he was on his way home then too, but he saw what was happening and started to run away. And he would have made it to a hiding place – he was just a few steps from the woods – but he didn't make it; they shot him. I don't know where they are buried. I only learned about all that recently, from a neighbor – a Pole who came here a few years ago. He was there during the war. And I heard some of the story from Uncle Pinio, who wasn't with my parents, and who survived. He'd escaped to Russia, and after the war he came back with a new wife, a Russian. He'd been to our village after the war, but he said there were gangs roaming around there, and he wouldn't let me go there. Then in the 1950s he immigrated to Israel, and that's where he died.

My father's brother Szulem and his family also survived. They were in Russia as well. Then they moved to Walbrzych, where my uncle had a bakery and a little shop. It had been a German bakery, and my uncle took it over. I remember he had an assistant who was German – Walbrzych was still a German town in 1946, full of Germans [see Germans in Silesian towns after 1945] [8]. I visited

them there sometimes. I remember my uncle had a great big beard – he was religious. He'd be so happy when I came to visit. Thanks to him I got in touch with the part of Father's family who had emigrated to the US and to Canada before the war. I'd seen a photo of them, and you could see right away that they had it much better over there – they were dressed in waistcoats and had watches with fobs. I even got hold of the address of one of them, and tried to correspond with him, because I was so poor then – I didn't earn much at all in light industry. He lived in Canada. I wrote and asked him to help me a little, and he wrote back, and sent a picture with his name written on it: Chaim. He looked like an elderly man already. The letter was in Yiddish, and it was typewritten. He wrote that he was an old man and that he couldn't help me.

All the others died, and so did the Jews we knew in Majdanek, where we used to go to pray. I don't remember their last names, just a few of their first names – one was Jankiel, another was Josel; I knew one of his daughters, her name was Sara. All together there were four men, and women and children. They all hid in an underground shelter, and they lived through the whole war, up until the retreating Germans came through there. And a tank rolled over the shelter, and they were all suffocated. A neighbor told me that after the war, and I couldn't get over it – to survive the whole war in those conditions, only to die at the very end!

When we arrived in Legnica, we didn't know anything here. People simply moved into apartments, whatever they could find. They were empty apartments left by the Germans who had been resettled. We moved into an apartment on Grodzka Street, along with a friend – there were four apartments in one building. He went to work at the steelworks, and I found work with the Russians, in a tank factory. [There was a Soviet Army headquarters in Legnica, stationed in Poland under the Warsaw Pact, and therefore in addition to numerous barracks there was an entire military infrastructure.] It was only called a tank factory – there wasn't a tank in sight, though, all we did was repair the engines. I worked there until they closed down the factory and left. [Editor's note: Some parts of military infrastructure were moved back to the USSR a few years after the war.] I remember they didn't pay well at all, and the work was hard. After that I found a job at Elpo – the Legnica Clothing Factory. They welcomed me with open arms. I worked there as a locksmith for 22 years, right up until I retired.

Right after the war Legnica was almost a Jewish town. [After World War II many Jews who had sought refuge in the unoccupied parts of the Soviet Union during the war were repatriated to Legnica and other towns in Lower Silesia.] I looked around the marketplace, or walking down the streets – Jews everywhere. I knew a lot of people who were traders then. They kept telling me to stop working and become a trader, but I didn't have a knack for it. They did business with the Russians – they'd buy watches or gold, and then sell the stuff for a profit. But I didn't like hanging around and haggling with them. The police could run you in for that in those days, and I'd got my honorable discharge from the army and didn't want to ruin my reputation. Everything then seemed so temporary – we couldn't be sure we wouldn't have to take off, or that the Germans wouldn't come back to Legnica. We'd have our dinners at the Repatriation Bureau – there was a cafeteria there. We didn't save money. We lived for the moment.

When I was working, I didn't participate in Jewish community life. I couldn't. At first, when the management at work was Jewish, they said I could go to shul and that they wouldn't count it as a day off – but they told me they couldn't pay me for the time. And I was young then, and praying

wasn't on my mind as much as earning a living was. But I kept in touch with Uncle Szulem in Walbrzych. I went to visit him often, almost every week. The first time I went, he was so happy to see me – he said I was the only one left, and he cried.

He showed me his bakery. They had a machine – it had been a German bakery, and my uncle had taken it over – and the machine mixed everything and the dough went into the oven. They made rolls and other kinds of pastries. My uncle worked mostly at night, and rested a little during the day. His wife Szosza minded the shop and sold the rolls. I remember that I sold a sort of onion roll there, for five groszy. Uncle Szulem's son had a little wagon, painted white, and he dressed in a white overall and took the goods around town. He had orders from various shops, and he'd take it around bright and early in the morning. His other son, Josel, moved to Legnica and settled down here. He worked a bit as a tailor, and sometimes smuggled stuff from the Russians. We visited each other quite often. Later they all immigrated – to Israel, I think, or somewhere else. They left without even saying goodbye. You'd think a cousin who lived right in Legnica could have come by and said they were leaving. That whole branch of the family was kind of strange.

Over the years in Legnica sometimes I have run into some anti-Semitism. There was a fireman where I worked – I even worked with him for a year. He'd watch me doing something and ask why I was doing it Jewish-style. It was a sort of joke, but with a sting. Normally he was as nice as could be, but sometimes he'd burst out with something like that without meaning to. But then, he's dead now, and one mustn't speak ill of the dead.

I remember during the Gomulka era [see Gomulka Campaign] [9] when they'd hold those 1st May rallies, some people would dress up as the prime minister, Golda Meir [10], going around in these long gowns making fun of her. In those days there was a lot of anti-Semitism here. Some distant relatives of mine had a shop here, and they had a sign in Polish on the shop saying it belonged to someone else, to some Pole, because the man's name was Chaim or something like that, and he had to keep it secret.

I changed my first name too, because I was always being harassed. Once I was in a sanatorium in Krynica [a spa town in south-east Poland], and when I arrived I went to register. They write everything down, and I tell the woman I'm named Icek Warzager, and she laughs and mutters something. That made me angry, so I filed a petition and had my name legally changed to Michal. But I remember my real name! Later on there was another guy at work who made nasty remarks about how I got a new apartment. He claimed the Communist Party [see Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR)] [11] had given it to me, just because I'm a Jew.

And I remember 1968, when Gomulka was trying to get rid of us [the anti-Semitic events of March 1968]. I remember what he said as if it were yesterday: 'I'm not driving the Jews out, but I'm not going to stop them from leaving.' Where I worked things were pretty calm at that time – that fireman would sometimes make his jokes, but no one did anything in particular against me. The very fact that I worked there so long shows that it wasn't so bad. If it had been I would have left that job – there was plenty of work to be had in those days; it wasn't like it is now.

I started to be regularly involved with the Jewish community in 1977. It used to be a big community, but nearly everyone's left [the Jewish community in Legnica now counts only few members, most of them are older than 70]. First the young people. And then I look around and –

hmm, this one's gone, that one's gone. Some of them said nothing about leaving. Some of them told me that they were going to Israel, that they were going to eat oranges all day long, and that they wouldn't forget me and would send me packages. And it would have been nice to get even one package – half an orange, at least!

I thought about leaving too, but one day two friends came back to Legnica from Israel, and one of them – his name was Berek – had red eyes, like a rabbit's. I asked him what that was from, and he said it was the heat. So the climate was what stopped me. And I didn't go to America because I was old already – what would I do in America? I'd gotten used to life here, and after all, I thought to myself, I knew these Jews here pretty well, and I had friends at work – we'd get together and sing a few songs and have a good time sometimes. All that was lacking was money.

Earlier there was a rabbi who used to come to our community in Legnica. His name was Schudrich [Michael Schudrich is now the rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz]. He was great. I remember that he'd bring candles for Chanukkah – we light candles at Chanukkah. He'd come here from Wroclaw to see what our prayer services were like. Sometimes he'd be here on Saturday and read the Torah for us. And now there isn't anyone to read the Torah. We just have the main prayers. No one's left who knows how to read the Torah – I don't myself. Maybe I'd be able to decipher some of the words, but it's very difficult, and I'm not going to try it. But I can read the regular prayer book, and the chairman of the community, Jozef Zilberman, and I share reading the prayers and managing all the religious stuff. The others sit there, and they chat quietly, because if they talk too loud it bothers us. Sometimes the chairman raps on the table and says: 'Quiet! No talking now!' And they stop, but only for a minute.

We always meet for services on Saturdays and on the holidays, and if a holiday falls on Friday, for example, we go on both days. On Yom Kippur we used to spend all day in shul, but nowadays we start later and don't take breaks, because hardly anyone comes back from them. We do everything the way it's supposed to be done, and in the evening around 5, when we go home, everyone who's been fasting rushes for some food. But the ones who used to fast have died now. I don't fast, because I reckon I was undernourished enough when I was young.

I always go to shul on Saturday, since if one or two people are missing, the service can't take place. I go, and I sit; it's not so tiring for me – just a little if I stand for half an hour at a time. Sometimes we have a memorial prayer for some deceased friend or relative. We recite a special Kaddish then – either I recite it, or the chairman does. The older folks who didn't emigrate attend pretty regularly. Every Saturday we have a half-liter of vodka, and sometimes someone smuggles in a bottle of their own, so we can always have a drink. And the little meal doesn't cost anything – they always prepare something for Saturday. For example a kosher chicken cutlet, potatoes with some gravy, and sweet tea with lemon – no wonder people attend! But not too many people – sometimes there's barely ten. It's a change of pace, anyway; with the meal and all, it lasts a couple of hours. We talk – we can't speak Yiddish, though, since not everyone there understands it. So we talk in Polish, and if I need to discuss something with the chairman, then we speak Yiddish.

I used to go to the social club as well [see TSKŻ] [12]. That was great: people danced and sang, someone would play the piano. There was music, and something to eat. I liked going there, especially when some performers were visiting from Warsaw. Then I was always the first one there. I don't go anymore; the bullet fragment in my leg bothers me more all the time.

I met my wife in Russia. We were there a while together – we even went and registered in the register office there as a married couple. And then we had another wedding here in Legnica. It never bothered her, my being Jewish. We never even talked about it; it just wasn't an issue for us. She often used to go down to the social club with me, and sometimes to community meetings as well.

My stepdaughter knows I'm Jewish and that's never been a problem for her. She doesn't go to shul with me, but she respects me and she knows a lot about Jewish culture. She studied medicine in Wroclaw and became a doctor; now she works in Legnica. So I have a good situation – she always gives me the prescriptions I need, and I don't have to stand in line. I take the same medication all the time, for my heart. I've had four heart attacks already.

I belonged to the Communist Party [PZPR]. Back then every party member was required to bring in one more. This one old communist zeroed in on me somehow. He told me I should sign up, that I'd be better off; I'd have a better job and higher pay. And that it was all just politics, nothing more. And that's how he pulled me in. That was here in Legnica, at the place where I worked – the factory PZPR committee. I went to meetings, briefings and things like that. And in May I had to wear that armband of theirs. I didn't have a choice; all the party members had armbands that said PZPR. None of it sat very well with me – they called those meetings really often, and they were after work, which made life hard. There I'd be after a long day's work and there was still a party meeting to go to, starting at 4:00 or 5:00. And they'd last for hours. But there were a couple of perks. They didn't give me any money, I didn't earn any more, but they always treated party members a bit differently.

And then along came Solidarity. There was this one party secretary [of the local PZPR Committee] – I still see him around sometimes. He set out a basket and said: 'Anyone who doesn't want to be a party member anymore can throw their membership cards in the basket.' Everyone started handing in his or her cards. And he asked me why I wasn't giving mine back. I told him: 'I'll bring mine tomorrow – I don't have it with me.' Which was true. And the next day I put it in that basket. Everyone else was doing it, so I couldn't very well refuse. I was no tough guy. And that was the end of my party membership.

I garnered a few medals over the years. Some are combat medals from the war, and some are for my work with the unions. For example the Union of War Invalids – I was one of their financial aid and loan officers. I'd give out loans – my word went. If I didn't like someone, I could say: 'We won't give him a loan this time – we'll give him one next time.' But I didn't do that. We still have an organization for Poles who served in the Soviet Army, and I'm the head of the chapter here. There used to be nine of us; there are three left now. Yes, they were old, and they've died. Not long ago we had a meeting, because the government wanted to take away our privileges, but thanks to the efforts of our authorities, we've hung onto a few, for the time being, anyway – at least those heart medications. And those medals didn't come so easy. They're for a lot of community service. I didn't have heart disease then, just the leg, and we used to go around to visit the old sick people. We'd visit them and take notes about how much their benefits amounted to, so that they could get financial aid. Sometimes we'd have to go way out of town, or hunt them out on housing estates. And so the authorities thought it over and came up with a medal as a reward. So I got a medal: one's a Victory & Freedom medal, one's a Cavalier's Cross; I got an Officer's Cross as well. The

most important one is the one from the war: the Order of the Great Patriotic War [13], first class. There used to be an allowance for people with that medal and two crosses, but that's been done away with now.

And so here we are – my wife is 85 years old now, and I'm 84. It's not too cheery anymore – we have a pretty monotonous life. It's even risky to go out. We used to go visit some friends who lived on the other side of the park. Once he came over at midnight saying his wife had baked a fish pie. He got us out of bed and we went to his house in the middle of the night. I had a big dog then, so I took my dog along. But there wasn't a soul on the street! And now I look out the window and see drunks walking around looking for someone to hassle. Nowadays I don't go out at night at all. I'm getting old – it used to be that hardly anyone lived to be 84. I can't walk very much, because my leg hurts. I can't put pressure on it. I put a thick layer of cotton wool in my shoe – otherwise I wouldn't be able to walk at all. And I sit at home. I don't have anything to do, since I'm not supposed to do any work or carry anything. I just look out the window, and sometimes I think about the old days.

Glossary:

[1] Compulsory schooling: on 7th February 1919 a Compulsory Schooling Decree was enacted implementing a compulsory 7-year elementary school for all children aged 7-14. It was to be free of charge. Under this system, secondary schools were not part of the universal school system: admission to gymnasium was on the basis of an examination after 5 grades of elementary school; some gymnasiums opened preparatory classes that laid the groundwork for studying at secondary level without attending the universal state schools. In view of economic difficulties, and also due to pressure from conservative circles, it remained possible to open private elementary schools; home schooling was made equivalent to public schooling; and it became permissible to open private gymnasiums, which on fulfilling certain conditions were given the same rights as state schools. A factor that seriously restricted access to secondary and tertiary schools was payment for tuition. The majority of Jewish schools were private, and there were various different types of school, both at elementary and secondary level. Many Jewish children also attended Polish elementary school.

[2] Anti-Semitism in Poland in the 1930s: From 1935-39 the activities of Polish anti-Semitic propaganda intensified. The Sejm introduced barriers to ritual slaughter, restrictions of Jews' access to education and certain professions. Nationalistic factions postulated the removal of Jews from political, social and cultural life, and agitated for economic boycotts to persuade all the country's Jews to emigrate. Nationalist activists took up posts outside Jewish shops and stalls, attempting to prevent Poles from patronizing them. Such campaigns were often combined with damage and looting of shops and beatings, sometimes with fatal consequences. From June 1935 until 1937 there were over a dozen pogroms, the most publicized of which was the pogrom in Przytyk in 1936. The Catholic Church also contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism.

[3] September Campaign 1939: armed struggle in defense of Poland's independence from 1st September to 6th October 1939 against German and, from 17 September, also Soviet aggression; the start of World War II. The German plan of aggression ('Fall Weiss') assumed all-out, lightning warfare (Blitzkrieg). The Polish plan of defense planned engagement of battle in the border region (a length of some 1,600 km), and then organization of resistance further inside the country along subsequent lines of defense (chiefly along the Narwa, Vistula and San) until an allied (French and

British) offensive on the western front. Poland's armed forces, commanded by the Supreme Commander, Marshal Edward Rydz-Smigly, numbered some 1 m soldiers. Poland defended itself in isolation; on 3rd September Britain and France declared war on Germany, yet did not undertake offensive action on a larger scale. Following a battle on the border the main Polish line of defense was broken, and the Polish forces retreated in battles on the Vistula and the San. On 8th September, the German army reached Warsaw, and on 12th September Lvov. From 14-16 September the Germans closed their ring on the Bug. On 9th September Polish divisions commanded by General Tadeusz Kutrzeba went into battle with the Germans on the Bzura, but after initial successes were surrounded and largely smashed (by 22 September), although some of the troops managed to get to Warsaw. Defense was continued by isolated centers of resistance, where the civilian population cooperated with the army in defense. On 17th September Soviet forces numbering more than 800,000 men crossed Poland's eastern border, broke through the defense of the Polish forces and advanced nearly as far as the Narwa-Bug-Vistula-San line. In the night of 17-18 September the president of Poland, the government and the Supreme Commander crossed the Polish-Romanian border and were interned. Lvov capitulated on 22nd September (surrendered to Soviet units), Warsaw on 28th September, Modlin on 29th September, and Hel on 2nd October.

[4] Great Patriotic War: On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

[5] The Battle of Stalingrad (also known as the Battle of the Volga): 17th July 1942-2nd February 1943, one of the largest and most decisive strategic operations of World War II. Initiated by a German offensive that intended to smash Soviet forces west of the Don and take control of economically significant areas of the USSR. German troops broke through deep into Soviet formations, powered through to the Caucasus, and over the period of 12th September-18th November surrounded Stalingrad from the north and the south, and occupied the center. On 19th November 1942 the Soviet counterattack began. The encirclement operation led to the German forces in the Stalingrad region being totally surrounded and cut off. The strike from 16th-24th December 1942 smashed the German-Italian army on the Don, and the concentric attack on the German troops surrounded in the Stalingrad region annihilated the entire 300,000-strong German formation (most of whom capitulated on 31st January 1943). The victory at Stalingrad was a breakthrough in World War II that created conditions conducive to the successful development of operations on other fronts.

[6] 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, Belarus 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 into the Soviet Union during World War II of their ethnic Polish population. The campaign was accompanied by the removal of Ukrainian and Belarus 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.

[7] Victory Day in Russia (9th May): National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

[8] Germans in Silesian towns after 1945: After the war the Polish-Czechoslovakian border was returned to its 1920 line, while the part of Silesia previously belonging to Germany was annexed to Poland. The vast majority of the German population was expelled to Germany, and Poles and Jews settled in the area (over 2,630,000 people by January 1947), largely people repatriated from Poland's prewar eastern territories. An exception to this in the years immediately after the war was the town of Walbrzych. The population structure by nationality there was markedly different from that of the rest of the country. Poles and Jews constituted only 14 percent of the population in the district, and 31 percent in Walbrzych itself; apart from them there were also Germans and Czechs (but mostly Germans). Between 1945 and 1948 there were several campaigns to settle the area with Poles, expel Germans, and resettle Czechs on a voluntary basis.

[9] Gomulka Campaign: a campaign to sack Jews employed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the army and the central administration. The trigger of 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 lack of loyalty to the state and of publicly demonstrating their enthusiasm for Israel's victory in the Six-Day-War. This marked the start of purges among journalists and people of other 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. Following 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.

[10] Meir, Golda (1898-1978): Born in Kiev, she moved to Palestine and became a well-known and respected politician who fought for the rights of the Israeli people. In 1948, Meir was appointed Israel's Ambassador to the Soviet Union. From 1969 to 1974 she was Prime Minister of Israel. Despite the Labor Party's victory at the elections in 1974, she resigned in favor of Yitzhak Rabin. She was buried on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in 1978.

[11] 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.

[12] 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.

[13] Order of the Great Patriotic War: 1st Class: established 20th May 1942, awarded to officers and enlisted men of the armed forces and security troops and to partisans, irrespective of rank, for skillful command of their units in action. 2nd Class: established 20th May 1942, awarded to officers and enlisted men of the armed forces and security troops and to partisans, irrespective of rank, for lesser personal valor in action.