

Emilia Leibel's Father Bencyjon, Photo Taken In The Cracow Ghetto By The Nazis



This is a picture of my father Bencyjon Grossbart. It was taken by the Germans in the ghetto in Cracow. I found it after the war at the Jewish Committee headquarters on Długa Street in Cracow amongst pictures of other Jews from the ghetto. There was a picture of my mother too. They let me make copies.

Back in Koz'modem'yansk, where I was deported in 1940 and where I spent the rest of the war, I'd gotten a letter from a very close friend of mine, a schoolfriend, Karola Wetstein. She wrote me that my parents were dead, that they'd perished in the last-but-one deportation from Podgorze - the

ghetto had been in Podgorze. The ghetto was liquidated in September [1943], and they'd died in March, taken to Belzec. I have no family. After the war I was just me and my daughter. My parents had perished.

My first steps on arriving in Cracow were to the Jewish Committee on Długa Street [the Provincial Jewish Committee was set up in 1945 at 42 Długa Street]. At the Committee I met Wiener, my cousin, and together we looked through the photo albums, and it was he who recognized them, I didn't recognize: 'Well look, this is your father and your mama.' I hadn't known my father without a beard. He hadn't known him either, but somehow he'd remembered better. It was a record of the people who had died. I don't know, Jews in general. Before the war my parents had had nothing. Their rented apartment in Podgorze had been in the ghetto, and there was no question of my going in when I got back even just to take a keepsake from home. I tried. I wasn't let into the apartment and that was it.

In my grandparents' family boys didn't thrive, somehow. The sons died as children, and when my father was born, Grandfather [Ozjasz Grossbart], to assure him a future - at least that was what he believed - took my father to some tzaddik, I don't know which one, some miracle-worker. He blessed him and gave him another name: Dziadek [Pol.: Grandfather]. So that he would live to see his own grandchildren, so that he could be a grandfather. My mother called her husband Grandfather. The children, my cousins - my father's sisters had children - they called him 'Uncle Grandfather.'

Father was a very handsome Jew, he was similar to his father. He always wore this little beard. He was graying, went gray very young. Graying was a family trait altogether, I think, because Father's sisters were gray-haired too. He was very tall and slim. He only put on more weight shortly before I got married. He developed heart trouble and the doctors forbade him to smoke cigarettes. Before that he'd smoked a lot.

The whole family traded in leather, skins: they bought up raw hides. Great-Grandfather, Grandfather, even my father was in the business. They were cattle hides. Used to make shoes. I remember how my father used to go places and bring back cattle hides, or somebody would bring them to him. My father didn't go to school, but Grandfather, with him the only one [ed. note: the only son], laid out on him so he could get an education. Father used to go to Vienna and take examinations there. But he didn't do a high-school final exam, because back then they had some other examinations. I remember that as a grown-up girl I saw Father's certificates from Vienna around the house: in German, math, correspondence - I remember that, there was such a subject. Yes, they were some kind of commercial subjects. So Father was an educated man, he spoke German well, and wrote it, too. He knew Hebrew. I don't know, can't say what political views my father had. I know he wasn't a member of any party. Definitely not.

My parents met in a romantic way. My mother came from Debica, and my father went to Debica from Cracow because he'd been found a match, some girl called Fryda. But in Debica was my father's nephew Moniek, who was brought up by his grandparents. He was maybe a 6-year-old child at the time, with his nose into everything and ears like pitchers. And that nephew said to him: 'Why do you want to go and marry that Fryda! That Fryda's got a beau!' He told him which boy she used to go down to the river with. 'You'd be better marrying Dasia, she's so pretty.' My mother was called Dasia Leibel, in her papers she had Ernestyna, but she was Ester, Hadasa, in Hebrew. And

Father, when he saw my mother, fell in love with her on the spot, because Mama was a beautiful woman. It was supposed to be an arranged marriage, but nothing came of it. And how I know about this at all I don't remember, but my mother never told me. I don't know when my parents were born, but the age difference between them wasn't very big, my father was maybe 2 years older. After their wedding my parents moved into Lagiewniki. And later on my parents were the closest of friends with that Fryda and her husband, the one she used to go down to the river with. Rakower, he was called, that husband of hers. They were very friendly with us and came round a lot. Their two sons went to gymnasium with me.

My parents were a very loving couple, so much so that we children saw it. When Mother was ill or something it showed especially. Father was a very good man, very kind, to the extent that I remember one time, after my brother's death it was, this conversation I overheard. The thing was that Father would sign bills of exchange for anyone who asked him. And then he'd have to pay the bills, because people didn't pay. And I remember how Mother used to reproach him, that he had a grown-up daughter and they had to watch their money. Not give it away to people, because they had none too much of it themselves.

I was born on 30th July 1911 in Cracow, in Grandfather's house in Lagiewniki. It is our custom, the Jewish custom, to name girls after their grandmothers, and there were two of us Emilias. The other one was Mila, because she was older, and I was Milusia [two diminutive forms, the latter used for younger children]. And later on, at school, 'Milusia' became 'Misia.' My brother's name was Jehuda. He was two years older than me. I was born in 1911, so he was born in 1909. Apparently he was born dead - I only know this from being told - and the midwife threw him up in the air or something - suffice it to say that he was lame after that. That one leg didn't develop properly.

I remember that I was 5 when we left Lagiewniki, because my brother and I were to start school in Cracow. We moved with our parents to a two-story house in Podgorze, at 19 Krakusa Street. We had a rented room with a kitchen and we all slept in that one room. The WC was in the yard. It was a very modest little apartment.

I was 6, perhaps not quite, and Father was in the Austrian army. In 1917 I was in first grade, and I remember going with my brother and Mama to the railroad station in Grzegorzki [a district of Cracow] to say goodbye to Father, because he was going to the front. I remember him in uniform and in his cap. And I remember that he was sent to Olomunc [a Czech town in northern Moravia]. Yes. Then, after some time, he came back, he had varicose veins and couldn't take the marches. So then he was in the army but in a commissariat in Cracow, in Zablocie [a district of Podgorze], I remember perfectly. He came home often, sometimes slept at home. Did he talk about the war? No. At least not to me - after all, I was a child. He came back home after the war ended.

We were in 5th grade at gymnasium, and I remember, it was appendicitis, Jehuda had an operation, and after that operation he died. In those days an operation on your appendix was a serious illness. My father had a complete breakdown. Before that he'd had some tannery, I don't remember that, I just know from having heard, that it was in Plaszow. I never went there, I just knew that he had it with some partner. When my brother died, Father lost his head, and that partner swindled him. And after that we had nothing, because Father lost everything. My father had no head for business, so hard times fell on our house. My father had been so jovial, so smiling, but after my brother's death all the life went out of him. For a long time. Always, really.

Julek Leibel was friendly with my father. They had common business interests. He was his 'gesheft freund.' 'Geschaeft' [Yid.: gesheft] means 'business' in German. And he used to come to our apartment, to see Father. He was a lot older than me, born in 1896, and I was in love with him, I gazed at him like a dog at the moon. All I used to do was serve tea or something, as you do for guests. It didn't occur to me that he took any interest in me at all. I was a modest girl. What was I? A young girl without a penny, without a dowry, and he was rich, had a car. What that meant back then! Julek was an independent leather exporter, and my father was a modest Jew, bought the hides himself and then dispatched them. And I was completely surprised and amazed when one day my mother called me into the dining room, where my distant uncle was sitting, the father of my future husband, and Mother said that he'd come to ask whether I would marry Julek. And I was speechless. I said that of course I would. He liked me, and that was it. He even bought me a trousseau. He didn't buy it, he gave Father money, so that nobody would know, and Mother got me some linens together, what I had to have, so that I'd have a trousseau.

The wedding was 3 months after the marriage proposal. Actually, it wasn't a big wedding, just a quiet ceremony in my parents' apartment. The rabbi came, married us, and that was it. No reception, because there was no money. There were just a few people: my Aunt Ela, the one who'd really brought me up, came down from Warsaw, and the 2 cousins of mine that were in Cracow. After my wedding my parents didn't need 3 rooms. They moved to Rekawka Street, because Father had heart trouble, and that was nearer Podgorski Park - the air seemed to be better there and he found it easier to breathe.

One day, in August 1939, my sister-in-law Giza's husband Jozek, who was a reserve officer in the Polish Army, said that Giza and her daughter and their parents were to leave Kalwaria at once and go to Cracow, because Kalwaria was a small town and who knew what might happen there. And unexpectedly I went with them from Kalwaria to Cracow - I really was going only for a day to visit my parents, but they, on my brother-in-law's instruction, were to take the train from Cracow to Jaroslaw, to Jozek's parents', because even if war did break out, the Germans wouldn't get that far. So we went to my parents' house on Rekawka Street.

Well, when my parents heard that, they insisted that I go with Giza. Father literally wouldn't let me get out of the car. He wouldn't even let me change - he packed me off in what I was wearing. That was the Monday, and war broke out on the Friday. I didn't want to leave Cracow. With the child, the nurse, and my little case, which I have to this day, and in that one dress, Father put me in the carriage and sent me off to Jaroslaw with Giza. My parents stayed. My father was as patriotic as anything! He said he wouldn't leave Cracow, wouldn't shift.