Stanislaw Wierzba

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Warsaw

Poland

Interviewer: Agata Patalas

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I met Stanislaw Wierzba a few years ago in the dining hall of the Warsaw Jewish Community. Someone had told me that he and his life companion, Jozefina Descours were exceptional among all the community's senior members: they had a natural tendency to help those in need, without expecting anything in return. A bit later, in the Educational Center of the Jewish Community in Warsaw, I saw Mr. Wierzba helping out with great dedication and care in the setting up of a photo exhibit. We met by a table which was covered by papers and photographs. It was then that we talked, for the first time, about Radomsko, his home town. Later we had a longer conversation in the home of Jozefina and Stas. They proved to be the most cheerful elderly people I had ever had a chance to meet. When he is with family and friends, Stanislaw Wierzba is wholly comfortable with his Jewishness. But due to his wartime and post-war experiences with anti-Semitism, he prefers to keep a Polish identity when interacting with the rest of the world.

My family background

I was born on 1st October 1925 in Radomsko 1. My father's name was Abram Dawid; my mother was Fajgla. Our last name was Ajgenberg. My mother's maiden name was Rotsztajn. Both my parents were born in 1901, though I don't know which month. When I was born, my father was 24 years old, he was still young, and my mother was the same age. Well, and then they lived till 1941, so they were 40 years old when they were killed, in the midst of maturity. My father was a carpenter, he had a small workshop. He was not the kind that made furniture, rather he was a wood-worker who made doors, windows, when someone ordered them from him. It was not a large-scale thing, rather a cottage-industry, that's how I would call it.

There were lots of Jews in Poland before the war. Just Radomsko alone, it was 1/3 Jewish. The entire main square, it was a truly beautiful square, was all Jewish businesses, mostly, almost 100%. The houses were Jewish-owned as well, I believe. Our house in Radomsko was at 29 Batorego, and it is still there till this day. We had a one story house; between our 4 tenants and my father's workshop somehow it was enough to live on. There were 4 children: two brothers and a sister, and myself – the eldest one. Every two years a new child was born. And up until the war the three of us went to school, and the fourth one, I mean my brother who was the youngest, he did not go to school yet. I remember that my sister was Rozia, in fact her name was Rojza, but everyone called her Rozia. My brother, the one who was younger than me, his name was Chaim, and I don't remember him very well. And the youngest one, who must have been 4 or 5 when the war broke out – I can hardly remember him at all.

It's an interesting thing, my father had a brother, and my mother had a sister, and the match was made for the 2 brothers to marry the two sisters. My father's younger brother and his wife, they only had one little girl. Because they were much younger than their siblings. The family name was the same, Ajgenberg, but his [my father's brother's] first name was Henryk. He was a tailor in Radomsko. I know that my aunt was named Zofia. And I can hardly remember their daughter. This child was a lot younger than myself, she might have been 5 or 6, anyway she was too young to go to school. And I don't remember my cousin's name. We all lived in the same house.

My father's second brother was a shoe-maker, and he had his workshop in the town of Przedborz, it is a small town on the river Warta [45 km from Radomsko]. This brother was also younger, father was the eldest of the three. This uncle's name was Ajzyk. He never repaired shoes, he always made new ones, and he used to come to Radomsko to get leather, because there was a wholesaler there, and in Przedborz they didn't have one. From time to time he would come, and he would take me along with him, you know, in vacation time, because they had the river close by. I can still remember, yes, I can, how I rode a truck to get there. What were the names of his wife and their kid? – that I don't remember. The wife stayed at home, minding the child. And I would take him for walks, in a baby carriage, it had these big wheels, this carriage. My uncle Ajzyk, he had no beard. I don't remember either of my uncles wearing one. Nor did they wear side curls, either. Just average Jews, that's what they were.

It was like this. A fellow would come in to the shop, I remember this, because I was there to see it, and he would say: make me such and such a pair of shoes. So my uncle would show him the designs, and either he would have the right one or not. Next, he would take his measure, the volume of the arch, the length of the foot, and he had a whole lot of these wooden forms, so when he was going to make shoes, he would first measure it all and sometimes he would add insoles made of cardboard, if it was too thin. What came out was a real work of art! It was all sewed by hand, the shoes were pounded into shape with a little hammer. He made them himself, he had a sort of workshop: a shoemaker's table and tools, and a stool. And he lived so close to the Warta, right on the ground floor, that if you were walking along the street you could peek inside and watch him pounding away at the shoes. He was always busy. He had his regular customers, who seemed to know him well. And if he got started on a pair of shoes in the morning they would be done by the evening, he would make them in a single day.

I knew one grandmother, my mother's mother, who died when she was over 90 years old. I only know that she gave birth to 12 children. They lived in a town called Gidle, which is near Radomsko

[20 km from Radomsko]. Six of those children grew up, and six... [died]. My grandmother later lived in the same house with us. I did not know her husband, my grandfather, he must have died early, because he did not live with us later on. Unfortunately, I don't know what his name was, I don't even remember my grandmother's name. And I never met the other grandparents, from my father's side.

But I do know there were some relatives out there, because I know that my mother sometimes traveled to see them, they lived in Czestochowa. They were rarely in touch with us, but when my grandma passed away, her daughter came for the funeral, without even a telegram, nothing, it was just that something made her come. This must have been in 1937 or 1938. So grandma must have been born in the 1840s. I think that in her whole life she had never been to see a doctor. She used to eat her meals with us. And I remember such a fragment. 'Jozio!' – you see, I had 2 names, Izrael Jozef, but they called me Jozio 2– 'Go and get your grandma, have her come over for breakfast.' So I went over to her place, but the door was locked, and grandma was not opening. Later my mother took the keys, and she found grandma asleep already. The end. Yes, this is how she died. She was not ill beforehand, the day before she had walked about, talked with people.

I went to one funeral – it was this grandmother. I remember this well, as soon as my parents got the word out, this whole team [Hevra Kadischa**]** arrived, they wrapped it the body in a shroud, they washed it beforehand. I was not inside the room with the body, but I was just you know... [peeking inside]. Later I did see the shroud, when they were wrapping grandmother in it. There was some period of grief, during which my father was not shaving. And later: 'At last I can shave!' Acquaintances came over. There were many people at the funeral – maybe not over 20, but certainly well over 10. Quite a few. You had to walk through the whole town, the caravan riding along, and I recall like it was today, how I walked. The graveyard was quite far from Radomsko, 1.5 km, or maybe 2 km outside the town.

My mother ran a typical Jewish household. She did not wear a wig, she had her own hair; my grandma did wear one, though. I remember my mother saying: 'Yes, later in life, when I am older, I will wear one, too.' And I believe this was natural for those times. My father did not even look very Jewish, he only had a slightly Semitic nose. In any case, I had good parents, I was never hungry, I was well fed, decently dressed. My home gave me everything one might need in those times. Sometimes I would even get 50 groszy [Polish currency, 1 grosz equals 1/100 zloty] and I would go to see a movie, of course only those that were allowed for kids.

There was one cinema in Radomsko. I smuggled myself once into it – this was right before the war – to see 'Halka' [screen version of the romantic opera by Stanislaw Moniuszko]. And this film I remember just like I saw it today. Even though since then I have seen the actual opera several times, it is this film that has stuck in my memory. Generally, in my family there were these two ways of thinking, equally important: this is Poland, here I am Polish, because I live in Poland, I am a Polish citizen; and here are the Jewish customs, the sadness or pain of another Jew – this is what I felt in my own home.

Growing up

We had a real family atmosphere in our home. I don't remember a fight between the brothers or sisters [my parents and my uncle's family], not ever. When the Sukkot (Kuczki) holiday came, we

would all built a booth in front of the house, and we would all eat our meals together. The two sisters would cook together. It was only our family that ate these meals. Why? Because besides us in our house there were only goyim, I mean Polish folks. How should I put it: we were all living in perfect understanding with these people. They did not bother us. They were proud to get matzah during the holidays. And I would also get special foods from them when their holidays came along. So we would really enjoy good times together, I have very good memories of this period. I remember when I got a bicycle from my father. None of those goyim had bicycles, so we would take turns shouting who was the next to take a ride. Or else we would play tag, or chase each other, or play soccer together.

Our family was not very religious, but we did observe all the basic religious rituals: Friday, Saturday, the candles, the dinners, all the holidays. During the meals the men were always wearing their kippahs – without one you would not eat, but otherwise, on daily basis, they did not wear them. And we kept kosher. I often went shopping with my mother. I was not aware at the time whether or not the food was kosher. There was a grocery store ran by a Jew, one had to go downtown, that's where mother would buy all the supplies: milk, flour, sugar – but did she buy meat there? The meat she would buy from a Jewish butcher. There were no refrigerators or freezers in those days, blocks of ice were brought and meat was kept in the ice. We always kept intervals between meals. When Easter came we only ate what was allowed – you were not supposed to eat soured foods. We were used to it, anyway, so it was never a problem. We also knew that if, for instance, you had milk for breakfast, then you had to wait a certain length of time, before you could eat something else, say, a piece of meat or something of that sort.

My mother really liked Sabbath. We always observed it at home. We sat down to the meal as a family – all six of us. My mother would light the candles, and there was always fish on Friday, and challah bread. This I like till this day, and I sometimes buy it in this downstairs shop of ours [kosher food store in the basement of the Jewish Religiuous Community in Warsaw] - I get both fish and some challah, they go together, that's how it should be. The taste of my mother's broth with noodles I have kept with me till this day. My mother would cook the noodles, she prepared the dough herself, she also baked cakes. There was no oven in the house – one had to take it to the baker's.

Near our home there was a Jewish bakery. My mother's chulent, which she made herself – we used to take it there on Fridays. A bit later, when I was bigger, I would often run to this bakery on Saturday, with my brother, and we would bring the chulent back home. Lots of people visited this bakery. It was an old-fashioned Jewish bakery, rather small, and right next to it there was the shop that sold their baked goods, which is where we would buy our bread. All that [the baked goods] were made by hand. And the stove was a wood-stove, I still remember that. My mother would buy hot charcoal from the baker's for her iron. Because in those days there were no electric irons yet... Well, I don't know perhaps they existed somewhere, but not where we lived, the iron we had had a 'soul' as it was called [a 'soul' based iron worked thanks to a metal insert which was heated with hot coals and placed inside the Iron].

On New Year's or Yom Kippur my parents would observe the fast, but I did not. Much later, in the thirties, they began pressing me to fast as well. I was always in the synagogue with my father on Yom Kippur: my father would spend almost the entire day there, but I would slip out at some point. Before the war broke out there must have been about two years when I endured the whole thing

[all the prayers at the synagogue]. What I saw in Radomsko, all the prayers at the synagogue, it was so full of pathos, so serious. I always considered it all very sacred, and I was quite simply proud of being able to go in there and look, maybe not so much to pray myself, as to look at it all, be present and witness it all.

I went to the synagogue up until the war. My father always took me with him – me and one of my brothers. The other one was too little. And my sister didn't go either. But I want to stress that this was not a systematic weekly thing – we only went occasionally, on holidays an other special occasions. At the synagogue, naturally, I used those devices [tallit, tefillin, phylacteries], my father had them all at home, you know, and later I also owned such things, but I only used a prayer shawl [tallit], while my father had a special briefcase [parokhet], he would take it along when we went home or to the synagogue. My father used to pray at home quite often, too.

I remember the synagogue [in Radomsko]. It was big, made of brick. It must have been several centuries old. It had a women's gallery all around, the traditional way. There were these beautiful banisters, benches. And in the middle there was a ... [bimah]. It was all very handsome looking. [The Great Synagogue of Radomsko was built in 1899. It is probable that an older synagogue, built in 1822, existed before it]. I can still remember the cantor's singing, it was very beautiful. Even today I can hear [that voice] reaching me.

I also remember the circumcision. This ceremony – the circumcision of my youngest brother – took place at home. I might have been 10 years old at the time. I mean, I was not allowed to see it directly, but I was present in the same room. There were several people, a prayer, the child screaming.

I also remember, but only in bits and pieces, the wedding of my uncle from Przedborze, and how my parents and I went to the wedding party. I can remember the main square in Przedborze, and the shop of some sort that they owned there, and a lot people... I could have been 8, maybe 9 years old at the time, I was just a small boy, a kid really. I kept close to my mother, I did not venture far from her. The wedding ceremony was inside their home, it all took place in this one room. But I remember the ...[chuppah], the festive clothes, all that. It was all so pretty. This was, in fact, the only Jewish wedding I ever went to.

And then, naturally, I went to school. When I started school I was 7 years old. I completed 7 years of elementary school, this is all there was before the war – and this was all, my entire pre-war education. I believe the school was on Kolejowa Street; where the rail tracks went in Radomsko. So every day on my way to school I had to cross the tracks, I still remember the path – it went along the embankment. The school was Jewish, I mean, the classes were all taught in Polish, but only Jews went to this school. And then, of course, I went to the cheder after school, in the late afternoon, although I do not remember much of that any more. I can't tell you whether it was state-owned or Jewish, it was the sort of thing that interested me at the time. Our math professor, I mean teacher, he was Polish, and I remember him because he was such a good maths teacher. But then there was also the lady who taught us Polish, her name was Panska, and her husband owned a printing shop in Radomsko. This Mrs Panska would teach us elements of Judaism, but without the prayers, we did not pray, and there were no special religious rituals at school. Also, at school we did not speak in Yiddish or Hebrew, everything was in Polish. There were portraits of great statesmen, Pilsudski 3, Moscicki [Ignacy Moscicki, president of Poland 1926 - 1939], but no crosses,

and no Jewish religious symbols either. The history lessons were all Polish history, the reading and writing was Polish, then there were gym lessons, because we had a small gymnasium, and a small yard for playing sports, and then the other subjects, such as singing, but there were no special Jewish subjects taught.

On the other hand, when there was a special celebration on the day of a state holiday, they would organize a gymnastic show, a sports competition, and then we would also participate, along with all the Polish kids from other schools. Before the war I would also go to the Sports Plaza when there was a soccer match, because, you know, they had these teams there, and I had a great interest in ball games. You would have to jump over the fence to get in there, or else you could buy the tickets. I was not [on any sports team] myself, but I did cheer for them, for all the teams... it was all the same to me... I know there was also a Jewish team of some sort, and I know they were classed among the others. But which class was it: 3rd, 4th or 1st...? No, I don't think there were any first-league teams among them. You would go there just for the fun of it, just to watch.

A bit later I started attending the cheder. My brother did not go there, and neither did my sister, because they were much younger than me, so they did not get a chance to begin their studies before the war. My cheder lessons were not every day, but, I believe, 2 or 3 times a week. But on which days – that I don't remember. There were 4 or 5 of us attending, all boys. I don't remember my friends from the cheder, so obviously I would not be able to recognize them today. I only know that two of them were twins. They were identical, and sometimes we would amuse ourselves guessing, trying to figure out which one was which. The cheder was right next to the synagogue. So we would spend an hour there, maybe two at the most, and the teacher taught us the Hebrew alphabet, reading, and he tested us on what we knew. It was not some sort of systematic education, more of an occasional thing, it seems to me. My parents could not afford for me to leave home, drop out of school, and go somewhere, to a Jewish school outside Radomsko. And in Radomsko there was no such school – I mean one that would teach exclusively Jewish things. I do remember that a Jewish newspaper was printed in Radomsko. And I remember that they described the cheder, and that my name was mentioned, among others, as one of its students.

I remember the old Jew who taught us, the teacher. But I don't recall his name. We was an old man, quite thin, with a long thin beard, and he wore a sort of round hat with a tiny shade, and to tell you the truth he was quite dirty. And his home, too, his apartment, was not very clean either. I know that my parents paid him some money, but this was none of my business. No, these are not especially good memories, because at school it was clean, there was order, everything, little seats and tables. And here we would just get together in a small group, a bench, a bit of a table, he sat at his table and we sat on benches. There was a paraffin lamp, the sort that was in use in those days. We did not write any lessons, there was no homework, it was just like that, sitting and talking. Only memorizing, no copybooks. But we did have to learn things by heart.

I can still sign my name, that's all I can still remember, I can write 'Ajgenberg' in Hebrew, right? I can understand nothing else, because it has all evaporated right out of my mind since then. What I learned at the synagogue was, I believe, useful sometimes. He [the melamed] would translate, he would sometimes read fragments of the Torah, and before the holidays he would explain to us how all these holidays needed to be celebrated. He explained in Polish or mostly in Yiddish. So I was quite up to date on the issues of Jewish tradition. I really enjoyed these lessons.

I had my Bar Mitzvah, it was done at home. It was in 1938, just before the war. In 1938 my father bought all these things [tallit, tefillin, phylacteries], they were all stored away carefully for me. I didn't use them every day, of course, and soon the wore broke out. I don't remember the names of all these objects, all this is a bit of a blur to me know, the details have evaporated. If I had contact with these things later, maybe I would remember], but I never did encounter them afterwards. At home we had a party, but only for the family members.

My parents would meet with the parents of my school friends, there would be parents' meetings at school, and it was usually my mother who went to those, because my father had no time. But generally we lived our lives within a closed family circle: the brothers, the sisters, the ones who lived right there with us. It wasn't a particularly wealthy life we lived, I don't think my parents could afford to give parties. From time to time we would have some guests coming, but it was mostly relatives. My father and mother would go somewhere, they'd be gone for a few hours, but I never asked them where they had been.

I must admit honestly, I think I was saved in part because I did not 'jew' my speech [Pol. 'zydzenie'- the tendency to incorporate into one's spoken Polish certain words, bits of grammar, syntax and intonation that were characteristic of Yiddish]. It was not until later that I realized I did not sound Jewish, like the others did. Because in our neighborhood I had these Polish friends that I played with. And at home, too, I spoke mostly in Polish. Sure, we spoke Yiddish at home, I could speak it, but not as well as I spoke Polish, because Polish was my everyday language. And it was also thanks to the fact that I knew about certain catholic rituals that I ... [was saved]. But that was much later, during the occupation. Nobody spoke Hebrew at home. In fact, I even doubt it if my mother and father knew Hebrew. They read the papers, but these were written in Yiddish.

I don't remember the titles of the Jewish papers. I know there was a local paper, I think it came out once a month, in any case, it was not a daily paper. But what it was called, what topics were discussed in it – that did not interest me much. I often saw this newspaper around the house. I remember 'Expres Poranny' [The Morning Express], and then there was also 'Gazeta Radomszczanska' [The Radomsko Gazette] – but that was a daily paper, in Polish.

I don't recall my parents reading anything, but I do know that I myself was quite interested, and so was my younger brother, Chaim. So now and again we would borrow books from the other fellows, or from the school, there was a school library and we would read things. I remember, as a 12 year old I was taken to the hospital with appendicitis. In those days this was considered a serious operation, it was 1937. It was a close call, I almost had a hemorrhage. I still have the scar, you know. So the day after the surgery my mother came to see me and she brought me a book which I remember till this day. I read straight through it, in one breath – 'The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe' [Full title: 'The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe' – adventure novel by Daniel Defoe, published in 1719]. From that time on, reading was quite a passion with me: later on I read 'W pustyni I w puszczy' [Eng: 'In the Desert and Wilderness' - adventure novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz, 1911], and all those other adventure stories that I really liked. I did not read Jewish books. First, because I wouldn't have managed to get through them. And second, because there weren't any around, or maybe there were, but I didn't know about it.

My father was not much into politics, I don't think so. His one political involvement was that he had been in the legions 4. But other than that, I think not. I remember the cap [so called 'maciejowka' –

cap worn by soldiers of the Polish Legions] that hung in the closet – a military hat from World War I, that my father had kept as a souvenir. In any case, my father did take part in World War I. He was a war veteran in those days. So on 11th November, the national holiday [on 11th November Poland regained its independence], he would put this cap on his head, and dress up in a suit, and he would take part in the celebrations. He was quite proud of this. And he had great respect for such things: the tradition, Poland, all things military, even the photos. I remember seeing pictures with my father in uniform, but I don't know what became of these photographs. But on the other hand, he also knew he was a Jew, and he never concealed it. Whether or not he was proud of it, that I do not know. But Jews would even run in the elections for Town Council of Radomsko. My mother would also vote in the elections.

When the fall-winter season came around, we would go to the cheder at dusk, and it was all dark by the time we went home. Once I had this unpleasant adventure on my way home, even though it was still light that day. I was walking home from the cheder, I might have been 12 or 13 years old, and I had by book-bag with me since I had gone there directly after school. And these brats my age attacked me in the street. They started shouting 'You Jew!', this and that and the other, they started grabbing me, and choking me, and they jerked at my bag so that all the books fell out – I had both Polish and the Jewish ones with me – and I started crying. Finally someone was walking by, and told them to leave me in peace. I remember how I got my things together, and that was the end of it. Fortunately, it was not wet that day, it was dry, but still I went home crying. But what could I have done, when I was just by myself, and there were several of them, and anyway I was a bit of a weakling, and rather small – even today I am not much of a superhero. So this happened to me once. Later on I avoided going that way, I would try to go earlier or take a different path, so I wouldn't run into these same boys again.

This was a period [the 1930s] when one had to be really careful, because of the anti-Semitic riots. These were really horrible things happening before the war – these campaigns 5. My mother's brother had a fruit and vegetable shop in Radomsko, and they broke the glass in his windows, destroyed the display, threw rocks... I don't know how it was in other towns, I wasn't so well informed, but I do remember one more thing: a Jewish friend of mine, his family welcomed the parents of another Jewish boy – these people were exiles from Germany. They were German Jews. At the time I did not realize what this meant, but it began to make sense to me later, when the war broke out. I remember that it was an entire family that came, and since I got around so much, I was soon making a little bit of money going over to their place and teaching their son math and Polish. He must have been about 3 years younger than me, this German boy. He could speak a bit of Yiddish, and so could I, and so we somehow understood each other. I do not remember his name. He lived quite close to our place.

I have no idea how many families such as this one came to Radomsko, but I am sure there must have been others – after all, many of them were leaving Germany, and I believe Poland was the only country at that time that made no problems for Jews who wanted to come. Soon terrible things began to happen. The real peak came in 1938. You really had to watch out in Radomsko, not to be caught alone in the street after dark, because these young thugs had basically taken over the streets. I myself remember this awful fight – it was really something! – because the Jews were putting up some resistance. Later my father explained to me that by that time there was this Jewish youth organization, made up of 19- and 20 year olds, it was called Hakoah 6, right? So they

had a meeting somewhere in town. And the Poles attacked them, and began the fight. Finally, the police came and put an end to it. By that time I did not go to the cinema any more.

A bit later, right before the war, people began talking – papers were also writing about it, though almost without commentary – about what was going over there, in the Reich, what Hitler was doing with the Jews. But we never mentioned the possibility that it could be a danger to us here – nobody was thinking of that. As if we believed it would just stay in Germany. Sure, people felt sorry for those Jews over there, what it had come to, and all, but the Jews thought of it one way and the Poles another way. The word ‘fascist’ or ‘hitlerist’ – these words were not used, not even by us. But of course the Jews were talking among themselves. My father and my uncle would talk about these matters. As for me, I did not ask too many questions, but I was old enough to understand more or less what it was all about. The war was coming, and we were all... I for instance, was quite an optimist as a boy, repeating slogans like ‘Leader, take us to Latvia!’ [actually: ‘Leader, take us to Kovno!’ – slogan of Jozef Pilsudski’s Polish Legions]. Or thinking of Zaolzie [the Zaolzie region was temporarily occupied by Poland in October 1938]. These were real successes at the time, it filled us with pride, we were boys after all.

At home we would also talk about Palestine, and I even remember a group of Jews who were planning to go to Palestine at the time. Some really did go – it was the young people from that organization [Hakoah]. But it was an option only for someone who was not burdened with a family. At our house this was not discussed, because it was not realistic for the whole family to go. But they certainly approved of the idea – let the young people go, they would say, let them get rid of this burden and start some other life over there. Anyway, it was well known, and at school this teacher I mentioned, Mrs Panska, she said so as well: that Jews have no homeland, despite the fact that ours is the oldest religion in the world, one that created all these other religions, they were just departures from our faith. This is the sort of comparison she made. But still, Jews were dispersed throughout the world. At the mercy of one state or another. This is how it was.

There is this image I still remember: a Jew with a two-wheel cart – I am not telling you fairy tales here – and he was harnessed to it like a horse, the cart loaded with something, a load on it. He was taking flour to the bakery where we bought our bread. From the mill. The mill was in the opposite end of Radomsko. Anyway, later, during the occupation, it was burnt down. So I stopped and I said ‘Mother, look...’. And she said ‘Everyone has got to live – and so they make their living any way they can.’ So there was a bit of Jewish poverty in Radomsko.

During the war

In 1939 the first bombs fell on several buildings in Radomsko. The houses burned down, and there were some dead bodies, as well. The Germans began right off by bombing the main square. So it was quite tough. I remember: the main road went right by our house, so we would run to the road, out of childish curiosity, to watch the soldiers, rows of our Polish soldiers passing, on their horses, with cannons on the wagons – all that was moving westwards and so we could guess that something was in the air. Besides that, one of our neighbors had a radio and these ear-phones, so we would go over to his house and listen to the speech from Warsaw, the one that President Starzynski gave. [Stefan Starzynski, the president of Warsaw 1934-39. His famous radio speeches made him the leader of the city’s defenders in September 1939.]

We lived in the outskirts of the city. The noise, the screams, going down to the basements, gas scares and so on. The news was going around that the Germans were on their way, so my mother prepared these bundles, and my father, all six of us – we all escaped, heading eastwards. We did not get very far, because we were moving on foot. The Germans caught up with us and we had to go back. We must have walked a dozen kilometers, and we collapsed in a barn. I remember it was September and there was a huge orchard there, really beautiful, the apples were ripe, and so we survived by eating these apples for a few days, but then we returned home. Our house was untouched, everything was in perfect order. We were not the only ones that had run away – a number of other families went off with us as well. And then for about half a year we went on living in our house, right until they created the closed ghetto. Because our house was not in the ghetto, it was outside.

This is when the gehenna began. As soon as the Germans came, immediately – they sent us off to work. Maybe not me, but my father – yes. He had to work. It was tough, he was earning close to nothing. There was a sawmill nearby, this is where he worked, they were making wagons for the army. I remember him returning home once, he was all bloody, all beat up. What happened? He was doing his job and he did something wrong, and one of the Germans beat him up and let him go. He came home all bloody – his back, everything. My mother started dressing his wounds, applying a compress, this and that. Mind you, it happened before the ghetto was closed. Later, things got much worse. My mother stayed a home, she never worked. A lot changed in our family life, because we were not going to school any more – not just us Jews, our Polish neighbors didn't go either, because the schools were not opened right away. There was no question of studying, nothing was the same as before.

It seems to me that my father was wearing a star when he went to work even before we were all sent to the ghetto 7. Except that at that stage the rules were not quite so strict yet. I did not, but my father did wear an armband on his right arm all the time. I was 15 then. Anyway, I was a small-sized kid, so I didn't wear one. My mother did. But she only left the house when it was really necessary, when she had to take care of some business, otherwise it was too dangerous to go.

After the war began we couldn't afford to celebrate Sabbath, to buy challah or fish. Life went on from day to day, it was just bare survival. There was no question of obeying religious rules. My father prayed at home, and all those things...[tallit, tefillin, phylacteries] – they were stored safely in some special place in the house. The conditions were so bad that religious practice was not possible, except that my father would pray silently, in his soul, and my mother did the same.

The Jewish circle was in Limanowskiego Street – that's where the synagogue was. And this is where they set up the ghetto. In 1940, I believe it was at the end of 1940, I can't remember exactly, but they set up the ghetto really quickly 8. It was quite a large area. It seems to me that the ghetto covered about ¼ of Radomsko. But it did not reach as far as our home, and so we were kicked out. Awful things went on. There was a regulation: at such and such an hour all the Jews have to report at the ghetto. And we were resettled, all six of us. Anyway, we were ready, because news had been going around that they were setting up a ghetto. I remember the bundles my mother made. There was bedding, some clothes, and whatever food we had – and we were ready to go. Germans supervised the move, but mostly it was the Navy-Blue Police 9. I remember their shouting: quick, quick, quick, and the Germans just standing off to the side, giving orders.

We were given space in a sort of shack and this is where we lived – a dark hole it was, really, with six persons, two makeshift beds, because we had left almost everything we had in our house. Right next to us there lived my uncle and aunt with their daughter, I mean my father's brother, Henryk, and my mother's sister, Zofia. They got a room in this shack right next to ours. I believe it was some Jewish community that helped arrange and prepare all this.

Once we were in the ghetto, I don't really know what we lived on. My father kept on working until we were all ordered into the Sports Plaza [the resettlement action took place in Radomsko on 9th October 1942]. What did we eat? – it's hard to say. We certainly did not have any meat or milk. Potatoes, then some more potatoes, a watery soup called 'zalewajka' some sort of borscht – all the same things you would eat 2 or 3 times a day, if you could afford it. It was terrible poverty. When my mother boiled potatoes, we would drink the water afterwards, so it wouldn't go to waste. If she boiled some sort of noodles, she would also keep the water, and we would drink that, too. Mother... she was just a typical Jewish mother. She took care of us kids, as much as she could, and sometimes she would give up her own portion. There was a time when I would have liked more soup but there was not enough to go around. It was a gloomy fact of everyday life, this struggle for life, just to survive.

I would sometimes run into a boy or a girl, someone I had gone to school with , but everyone was so busy with their own problems, that there was no question of a friendly chat about school, like sharing a memory. Every one was so down, so depressed, even the kids felt it. I was 14, 15 years old, so I was already thinking, but it wasn't exactly profound or specific thinking. I did not go into the street at all by then, and back in the barracks all the kids kept together, we did everything together, each one of us listening for some news. I would try to overhear what the adults were saying, and things were getting quite bad, but until the end there was still hope in people. The parents would try to keep us away from the misery, if they talked, it was among themselves, it did not reach us, they didn't want us to sink deeper into desperation. But how can you keep a secret if you are six people living together in a tiny space? Now it is more clear to me, this feeling. There was talk, there were stories going around about Shoah, I can even remember the name of the town, Treblinka 10... Maybe my parents were talking about these things, about possible escape from the ghetto, but none of it reached us kids. And we couldn't have afforded to do it, to give someone a bribe. With what money? No, my parents did not have that sort of money.

There was this mechanical workshop, owned by a Polish man, and he hired me. I worked hard and soon I learned the trade of a turner, a lathe-hand. I was in good shape, because he was feeding me, and I could often take some food home, as well. My family was pleased, and I was pleased, and so was he, because he was paying me peanuts, and I was producing things on the lathe. He ran this workshop throughout the entire period of the ghetto. Every now and then German cars would come, and he would repair them. I was helping him, and so I could more or less make a living. There were no set hours, I would just go and work, and sometimes I would stay till evening, and later they would invite me to dinner. It was quite close, almost the same courtyard, in the middle of the ghetto. Before the war we didn't know him at all, the owner of the workshop. I got interested in the work. As a boy, my dream was to learn a trade. I never dreamt of getting higher education, that was impossible. And so this turned out to be my fulfillment. But it is my habit to do well whatever I undertake. This is how I have been ever since childhood: I like to do things well or not at all. And I am quite sensitive that way even today.

Before we went to the ghetto we got gestures of solidarity from many Poles – despite the fact that the difference in treatment [by the Germans] of Poles and Jews was already quite visible, everything was still alright. In any case, the Poles were also suffering far too much – but still, there was always some sort of help from them. Once we were in the ghetto, I was often thinking up ways to get out. Several times I did get outside, together with my sister, who was a blond, by the way. We would get something by begging, or else we would buy it with the bit of money my mother gave us – there would be Poles on our way, standing outside the town border, and they would have something, like bread or potatoes. And at first this barter went on fairly smoothly. But later everything changed. You know, it does not surprise me at all, because the Poles were living in a state of constant fear.

Which year was it? In 1941 [ed. note: 1942] they run us all into the Sports Plaza in Radomsko – and this is where the real gehenna began. It seems to me that in Radomsko these things happened quite differently than in Warsaw, where Jews were transported gradually, in groups. The ghetto in Radomsko didn't have a center, of the kind I hear they had in Lodz, some factory where Jews worked till the very end 11. These were completely different conditions. The Germans in Lodz had to keep some Jews alive because they were making products that were needed by the German army. Like the sawmill where my father worked, that made wagons for the Geramans. But other than that, there was no industry in Radomsko.

And so they rushed the entire ghetto out on a single day, I don't remember the exact date [ed. note: 9th October 1942]. I know the weather was quite nice, there was no rain, it might have been late in the Spring [ed. note: it was in the Fall]. Nobody was writing chronicles, and later people were just happy if they lived through it. What can I tell you, the place was crawling with Germans and the Navy-Blue police, everything was surrounded. There was weeping, screaming, crying – it went on and on all day, from dawn onwards. The Germans began calling the names of people they still needed. Later they made us form rows, and rushed us into the train station, and into the train cars. Later I was told how it was done: the train cars were all set up, everyone was rushed into them, and everything went off. I don't know where exactly they took them all... all the Jews. My parents, everybody. Where did they all die? Most likely, in Treblinka. I was the only one to escape. But later, after the war, I found out that my father's brother, the tailor I have told you about, he also managed to run away and he joined the underground somewhere in the Swietokrzyskie mountains. I don't know how much truth there is in this story, I was never able to confirm it – but I was told he was recognized and killed by men from AK [soldiers of AK – the Home Army] 12. This is the story that reached me, because I talked with a fellow who was in the underground as well in that area, and he knew my uncle. And my father's other brother, the one who lived in Przedborze – I don't know... Until this day I do not know what happened. In any case, there was never a sign from him, nothing. Maybe there is some trace in the Jewish Historical Institute 13. I went there a few times, asked around, but nothing came of it.

So what happened? How did I get away? My father pushed me out. 'Run!' – he said It was a moment. There was a gap and I used it. At the exit routes from the ghetto there was police, Germans. There was commotion, shouting, noise, and I used that moment to run away, no one even looked at me. I went all alone – and that was it. I managed to escape. And so my solitary life began.

I headed straight for home. And I ran into one of our neighbors – before the war this was a person my family was quite close with. Sure, they fed me, gave me some food for the road, but then the neighbor says to me: 'You'd better leave, quick, because we are scared as well.' I understood them, and later I understood even better – at first I was a bit bitter about it, why they treated me this way. These were good friends, we were quite close, and so I am not surprised at them at all. The intimidation was really powerful, so that everyone was just watching out not to get in trouble. I never went there again afterwards.

Where was I to go? I went to the Polish man for whom I had worked earlier on. He always said to me, when I was still in the ghetto: listen, if you manage to run away, you just head for Warsaw. And this is what I did. So he helped me quite a bit. One more thing I remembered just now. The man I worked for, or maybe it was his wife, they gave me a chain and a cross. And I wore it afterwards, even when I lived in the orphanage. Perhaps this is what protected me in a sense? I didn't know what to do, and I didn't have anything of my own, so I went to the train station, got on a train, and went to Warsaw, where I had never been before in my life. At such a time – and without a ticket, on top of everything else. But I got through, with nobody even looking at me in the train, because this was period when a lot of people traveled, and there were special cars for Germans, where the Poles were not allowed to enter: Nur fűr Deutsche.... Lots of people with luggage, with bundles, and I just somehow stuck myself among them.

This is where the second story of my life begins. This new life, in Warsaw, is far better documented, much more orderly, because by then I was basically grown up, I was living independently. One thing I can tell you: I believe in destiny. I had several such events in my life, during the occupation, where something was pushing me: do this, do this! It wasn't that someone had talked me into doing it, but I did these things unconsciously, and then it would turn out I had done the right thing. I always feel as though someone was holding their hand above me: do this, don't do that.

I didn't own a thing except for a photograph of my father which I kept. I didn't know anyone in Warsaw. I began life as a bum in the station. Sometimes I would make a bit of money: a German was leaving with some suitcases, so I would jump up and carry those. I befriended this boy, I am not sure what sort he was. We would carry a suitcase together to the tram stop, and someone would give us a pack of cigarettes for that. Then I would trade the cigarettes for bread – so there would be something to live on. This is how we got by. I slept in the station. I don't remember how long this lasted.

At last, I said to myself: what the hell, why should I live in such conditions, when there are Jews around here – and so I went to the ghetto 14. Voluntarily. Once I was there, it was another story entirely. I lived in a passageway, there was sort of hole there, maybe you could even call it an apartment. There were rags lying around, so I would sleep on them. I was close to a kitchen [one of the communal soup-kitchens ran by Jewish Social Self-Help], where they gave away food, and I would always get a bowl of soup there. So I was glad that my stomach was not empty, that's all. I don't even know what street this was on. There was some sort of life going on in the ghetto, some announcements, but none of this interested me; only one thing mattered to me – to have a place to lie down, and something to eat. No matter where. I was being eaten by lice, there was no place to bathe, and of course no question of changing my clothes. I kept living in the same place. I was an outsider, I was not part of that community.

I stayed in the ghetto almost until the uprising 15. Quite a chunk of time. Later, when I escaped from the ghetto, I went back to the train station again. I ran off right before the uprising, or maybe it had already began by then. I think so because you could hear the Germans, and some shouting. A lot of moving about, some sort of selection again [between January and April 1943]. They were leading us off to work 16 in groups of 150, 200 – overseen mostly by the Navy-Blue Police, and by one or two Germans. I look around, I see a gap. A lapse of attention... and I ran away again. Just me alone. It was even like this that some of the Poles threw a piece of bread once or twice, but that was outside the ghetto. And so I managed to run off. And again, I headed straight for the station.

We were nomads of sorts, there was this other boy at the station, just like me, but I don't think he was a Jew. One day a nun comes by and says: 'What are you doing here?' And she took us to an orphanage. It was at Czerniakowska Street 219, right opposite Wilanowska Street, but I don't what it is called nowadays [Aleja Wilanowska]. I think there is a memorial in that spot there now, for the soldiers who died when they were forcing their way across the Vistula [River] in 1944. The orphanage was in these fairly decent barracks, it had a fence around it, and there must have been several dozen of us. All boys, all my age. You can see in this photo here, they were all my age. It is hard for me to say if there were other Jews in that group. It was an orphanage under the supervision of nuns, only the director was a layman. His name was Lada. He and his wife were very decent people. I was basically restored to life in there, cleaned of lice. They had no idea I was Jewish.

My last name? In the mechanical workshop where I worked in Radomsko there was this fellow, his name was Stanislaw Wierzba, and so now I just took his name. Just like that, for no special reason. And when I got into the orphanage, I was immediately sent to work, along with all the other boys of 16, 17. I was directed to a mechanical workshop and I stared to work there, I became the helper of the turner, and since I was quick to learn, I was soon working independently. I got paid, and I had to contribute part of my pay to the orphanage. The people working in the orphanage would come to check on us, and the director would come and he would always ask how I was behaving, and he would always be told nothing but praise, because I was trying the best I could.

The nuns would only check now and then if our clothes were clean, they would change sheets, we had those bunk beds, and there would be nuns doing things in the kitchen. The sheets were changed regularly. I am not sure if this was because of me, but there was a time, or maybe it was twice, when they took all of us, I mean all the boys living there, to have us cleaned of lice. We took trams. Next to the Roma Theater on Nowogrodzka Street there was an establishment, public baths, where you would go to and bathe, and give them your clothes, and it all went through some sort of steam, to get rid of the lice.

There were problems with the public baths. It was once a week, I remember these things... The room with the showers was relatively small, so they arranged the bathing in two shifts. Two groups. One group went right after lunch, when there was still daylight, the room had windows. And so I always made an effort to get into the second shift: I said I was going to work, I have something to do today. I would get on a tram and just go off somewhere, and then I would bathe in the evening. And even though the room had some sort of lighting, still it was a bit better. Unfortunately, I was always aware of that. But somehow I avoided it, somehow nobody ever noticed [that I was circumcised].

After my 18th birthday it was time to get an ID card. Where would I get a birth certificate. So I told them: Wierzba Stanislaw, born in such and a place, and I didn't say 'Radomsko,' but I said 'Radom,' no idea how that came to me, and I mentioned a monastery where I was baptized. They sent out these documents, and the managers arranged for the so called kenkartas 17 for us. They got one for each kid as soon as we turned 18, because there were quite a few cases similar to me, not in being Jewish, but in not having a family, homeless, there were lots of us like that.

At the orphanage one had to pray. Before the war I had no contact with Catholicism, except indirectly, and I had not gone to church. But my friends had made the sign of the cross, I had watched them, and I could imitate this even as a kid. And I knew some of the church rituals, too. I knew the basic prayers. And since I was quick to catch on, somehow it came easily to me, and so I knew how to cross myself properly, how to pray before a meal, the main prayers, and anyway we did all that as a group. So whenever there was something I did not know, I would just go ahead and pretend to sing or recite. We sang in a church quire in Powisle [district of Warsaw]. I had two good friends at the orphanage. Later, after the war I completely lost touch with them. As soon as the Warsaw Uprising began 18 I worked with them in a mechanical workshop. It was in Wspolna Street 46. We were putting together weapons for the uprising. At the time the English were making deliveries of arms for the fighters, but they had to be assembled, because they came in separate parts – these 'stens', as they were called, or automatic guns. We kept working for another two or three weeks into the uprising, as long as there was electricity in Warsaw. It was pretty good there. They brought us food.

I would sometimes go to the ghetto walls. I remember, I was even there several times with the other boys, to watch the ghetto burning [the ghetto was burning in the Spring of 1943, during the uprising]. I was afraid someone might recognize me. There were so many onlookers around, the Poles staring. I avoided people, let's be honest here, I had no direct contacts, I was afraid. I can remember the explosions, the fire going up in flames. If I am not mistaken, there were cannons in the square, shooting into the ghetto. Because they [the Germans] did not bomb from airplanes – they only used cannons. So there was shooting, explosions, howitzers, shells, machine gun shooting in series. I could not discuss this with anyone, but you can imagine what I was thinking. I couldn't even touch any topic vaguely connected to it. I was afraid of all that. Among the orphanage boys we rarely talked about such things, and I never had anything to do with older folks, and the boys were pretty indifferent to it all. I kept as far away from these topics as I could. I preferred not to touch them, because I knew that a single word could do me in, I would get tangled up, give myself away – I was conscious enough of my situation to know this.

After the [Warsaw] uprising the Germans began moving everyone out of the city. I ended up in Puszkow [small town about 20 km from the center of Warsaw], but soon I ran away from there as well. Where to go? Near Grojec I got myself a place with a farmer, in a sort of colony, with several buildings. They needed some men, and I worked for this man until liberation. He was glad to take me on, not knowing I was Jewish, thinking I was an escapee from the uprising. Nobody ever asked me who I was exactly. I showed them my kenkarta, everything was in order, last name, first name. Whatever happened to your parents? I don't know, my parents ran away. But are they alive? I don't know, maybe later I will try to get in touch with them after the war. This was in the fall, and the were beets, he was growing sugar-beets, and we worked together. I was in the field with the horses, somehow I was quick to learn all those things. Then Christmas came, the holidays, and it

was time to go to confession. I went to Grojec, walked around the church a bit, and then came home from confession – that's how I did it. That's all. That's how I survived till the end of the war.

After the war

The war was over. I remember the day the Germans were running away, near by Grojec, they were moving in waves, and the Soviet tanks. It was wintertime [January 1945]. As soon as the Germans were gone, the Russians moved on. Once that was over, I got into the first army car that was passing by and headed for Warsaw. Warsaw was in flames just then. I met a friend – one of the boys, he had come to the orphanage, and we found the building all burnt down, except for the basements. It turned out that the Germans had made some of the basements into living space when they were defending the Vistula. And we moved right in there. It was furnished quite nicely, beds and everything, there was even food, German cans put aside. So we began cooking in this bunker – it was alright. The other boy's name was Kalinowski, he was one of my friends.

So when it was all over I read an announcement they were recruiting for the army. I hurried to Filtrowa street, to the RKU [Regional Recruitment Center]. They drafted me on the basis of my kenkarta. This was 21st April 1945. I wasn't yet 20 years old when I volunteered for the army. They immediately sent me to the Officers' School in Andrzejewo, near Lodz. I was so glad to be alive, so happy, the food, the uniforms, the sleep – this was a whole new world! It was really something! I was overwhelmed. And I tried my best, because all that was there for me! I was quick to learn – so quick that they thought of sending me to Warsaw after graduation. But I said no. So where do you want to go? To Poznan! I don't know why. So they sent me to Poznan. I stayed there for 6 years in a unit that was under the KBW [Internal Security Corpus] 19. It was 1947-1953. This is where I began my military career. It wasn't until 1953 that I came to Warsaw.

I did not report anywhere after the war. Not to the Jewish Committee 20. Today I think of it as a terrible mistake. All that time I spent, so to speak, hiding in the closet, I mean hiding my Jewish roots. Though when I went drinking vodka with the other officers, they would often come out with anti-Semitic speeches. I would just sit and listen to it all, but mostly I just avoided any sort of discussions. Well, they didn't realize I was a Jew – had they known, they wouldn't have even talked with me. The commander of the corpus was a Jew, the commander in chief Koninski was also a Jew, all those in charge – all of them were Jews in the Internal Security Corpus.

I needed a birth certificate, and I got the original one out of Radomsko. They had the documents I needed, and those of my siblings, all of that was there. For whatever reason, my mother had waited four years, till 1929, to take care of the formalities, though I was born in 1925. Later I came to Warsaw and I wanted to make it all legal, to keep the name I had chosen for myself. I went through the courts, hired an attorney who took care of it all, so I didn't even need to show up in court, I just got their decision, here it is, partly handwritten. No, I did not want to change my name. It wouldn't have been a good idea to return to my real name. After all, I had spent half of my life in the military. When the lawyer asked about the names of my mother and father, I told him it was just like in the birth certificate. But in the kenkarta it was a whole other story: Adam and Felicja. My mother's name was Fajga, starts with an 'f', so I said to myself – why not make it Felicja. I said to the lawyer: keep the last names the way they are in the kenkarta. So it is only the last name that I changed. The birth date, all that is according to the old version.

After the war I knew all about these things. When they were taking people from the Warsaw ghetto, I knew full well: yes, so this is what they did with my parents, too. What I know – that I told you already: my father's brother, Henryk – apparently, he, too, managed to run away from the Radomsko ghetto. There was this one man who had been in the underground and he heard that... [Home Army soldiers killed Henryk]. That's the one thing I do know. So when it was all over I was well aware there was nothing, no point searching for anybody. Perhaps that's why I did not go out of my way to find out. And the house where we lived before the war – no one there received any signals either. Everything gone without a trace.

My daughter sometimes complains to me: dad, why didn't you try harder...We had some distant relatives in the United States. I know they tried to get in touch. My father's sister emigrated to the USA on the Batory ship before the war, it was 1935 or 1936. I also remember how they sent these brochures showing the journey on the Batory, how they tried to encourage us to emigrate. I don't know why, but I somehow never established contact after the war. Maybe I could have just sent a letter to them, perhaps someone would have still been alive. But now, with the third generation alreadt, it is definitely too late. It just happened this way - I was glad to just be alive, this is the fundamental thing. These relatives in the USA, I don't think they were looking for me after the war. After all, I was registered at the Jewish Historical Institute, I have certification of my stay in the ghetto, so they know about me, they have my documents there. So they would have let me know one way or another, but there was nothing.

I got married when I was 30. It was not really on my mind before that. I had girlfriends, various adventures, if you know what I mean, but when I turned 30, I said to myself: it's time to get serious. This was in 1955, and my daughter was born 2 years later, in 1957. Except that with my first wife the situation was such that we lived together for quite some time, for 3 or 4 years, before the wedding. Why? Because she came from a rich family, a Polish one, and there was a regulation in the military that officers had to take wives from the 'non-bourgeois' social classes. And I did not press for marriage, because they wouldn't have let me marry her. Before the war her father was the head of the postal office in Kosciana. She was a student and she was pleased that I could help her out: I had a salary, my own room, and she was staying with me. Wait, how long did this last? 2 or 3 years after the liquidation [after Stalin's death and the change of political climate in Poland] we got married. By then the times were better – it was in 1955. But of course in 1952 or 1953 when I was at school in Rembertow, she would even come visit me as my fiancee. But nobody knew about it.

Right after the war I had nothing to do with Jewish organizations. My wife knew that I was Jewish. And she told my sister-in-law. And in the place where she worked there was a Jewish woman working, who was married to a Jew, and she put me in touch with him. He directed me to the Jewish Historical Institute: he said, go, look up your documents, get some sort of paper made out for you. And so I started living a Jewish life at last, I got in touch with the Institute, it must have been some time in the early 1990s. I joined some Jewish organizations, I have my ID here.

In 1968 21 they suddenly remembered that I was Jewish and they kicked me out of the military. Of course, they did not make me feel this directly. But somehow there was this coincidence that at the same time I got quite ill, I had a resection of the stomach, I was in bed, away from work, on sick leave. So they sent me to a military medical committee. And the committee proclaimed 'unfitness for military service in time of peace' – this was their final verdict. So now I could retire, because I

had been in the army for quite a long time, since April 1945. Except that I had the so called ‘old wallet retirement’ [low pension]. But later they added some extra money to it, so now it is not so bad.

I don’t try to conceal the fact that I was a party member. First, I belonged to PPR [Polish Workers’ Party]. There were three of us in Poznan who belonged to it. I was recruited by a friend of mine – he asked me, and I said: sure thing, I’d be glad to join. This was secret. There were a dozen or so of us in the unit. It must have been 1946. And later, in 1948, there was the unification [of the Polish Workers’ Party and the Polish Socialist Party] so then I was just a regular member of PZPR [Polish United Workers’ Party] 22. And unfortunately I stayed there until the very end. Until they dismantled it – I still had my party ID at the time. I had all the best things, I was doing fine, the salary was decent. I was based in Rembertow and on top of that I could also attend school in Bemowo. So I got my salary each month, and I could study for free as well. So I had perfect conditions, so why should I not be in the party, I respected this. Unfortunately, that’s how it was.

I see now the mistakes [of the communist system], sure, we can say that now, but in those days... But when I heard about the post-war anti-Semitism, I just kept quiet like a mouse. Like when the Kielce pogrom 23 happened. But then, I ask myself: how could I have reacted, when I myself was in danger. It was a time when I didn’t really want to reveal myself. I just kept quiet.

In Legnica there was an officer school. I often visited this school: I would go to the headquarters for the entry exams, the advancement exams, we were in charge of those committees, it was not just me. And Legnica was full of Jews at the time 24. I would think to myself, dear God, as I passed them, but I didn’t have the courage – I don’t quite know why – to approach one of them.

Until this very day I still have obsessions of this sort. Two years ago I went to the opening of the commemorative plaque at the Gdanski Station [plaque commemorating the forced emigration of Jews from Poland after March 1968]. A few days later I ran into my old neighbor, from where I lived before. I saw you over there, at the station, she says... It was easy to see me because they showed snippets of it on TV. I didn’t know this, but she saw me on TV. I have been in hiding. I was afraid, and until this day the feeling has stayed inside me, this secrecy, though things are so different now. I don’t feel so tied up by it all any more, and anyway both my daughter and my daughter’s mother-in-law, and my son-in-law, and my grandchildren – they all know I am Jewish. My daughter even said to me once, dad, it makes me feel proud. And so I don’t hide it any more, but somewhere deep inside me there is still something [a fear].

And here is how it began. I am awfully grateful to [Halina] Elczewska [Jewish social activist] because it is thanks to her that I began to go there [to The Association of Jewish War Veterans and Victims of Prosecutions during World War Two] 25. She had to drag me over there, and I was still young at the time. It must have been in the early 90s. When my wife died, I was left alone, my daughter busy with her own life – this is when I began to get more involved. Eventually I was so much a part of it all that when they had their elections, I was chosen as board member, and I am on the board for the Warsaw section of the Association. I am so much used to it that I don’t think I could live without it...

I met Jozefina [Jozefina Descours – Mr. Wierzba’s companion], who got me involved in the Senior’s Club at the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw] 26. I also joined the Children of the Holocaust [Children of the Holocaust Association in Poland] 27, but it turned out that I was too old – by just 3

months. You see, I was born in October [1925], and they only accepted those who were born from January 1926 onwards. Still, I did join, and I am a member now, but without full voting rights, an associate member. I belong to the community, and all the Jewish organizations. I am glad to pay my fees, and to participate in meetings. It's been many years now that I've belonged to the TSKZ [Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews] 28. All of that, all four organizations. When New Year comes, Jozefina and I pay all the fees, and in a sense this is a pleasure to me. It's not that I have to pay. And I have no special profits from it. It's just that I want to. Now I want to do it. When I joined the Jewish organizations and then became familiar with all the issues it became a big source of pleasure for me. If it were not a pleasure, no one would force me to do it. But as things now stand, I know I have a responsibility. Today it is the Veterans [The Association of Jewish War Veterans and Victims of Prosecutions during World War Two] – they meet Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. I'm always there for the meetings, and now I also come on Tuesdays and Thursdays because we are updating our files. I am also a guest 3 times a week at the Seniors' club. I like to play cards there or read the newspapers. In any case, I feel good in all this here. And then I also come to eat at the Jewish community dining hall. So that nowadays I do not hide my Jewishness, quite the opposite.

I rarely go to the synagogue, but when there is a special celebration I do go there, with pleasure. Sometimes I come for Yom Kippur, but I don't fast. And to be honest with you, I don't know how to pray. It seems to me there is a big difference between this synagogue [the Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw] 29 and that one [the pre-war synagogue in Radomsko]. Whenever I hear the singing here, I immediately remember the cantor of Radomsko, although I never met him personally, never talked to him in my life. The Radomsko synagogue is still there, the walls still exist, I have seen it, except that now they've got a marketplace set up inside it.

We often visit my daughter, Jozefina and I. My grand-daughters know their grandpa is a Jew. And I don't think they keep it a secret. They have all seen this tape I've got here [the interview for the Spielberg Foundation], and they loved it. This was a few years ago. I am pleased with my daughter. They have got this really nice house in Stara Milosna, a condominium, it's really well furnished, they are doing quite well. The older grand-daughter is completing her MA in journalism. The younger one is studying biology. And just yesterday my daughter earned the highest academic degree [post-doctoral degree, 'habilitacja' in the history of literature, 8 March 2005].

Last year Jozefina and I went to Radomsko, to see it all. I showed her around, what is where, showed her our house: it has fallen to ruin, with nobody taking care of it, and the owner dead. I even ran into an old acquaintance, who still lives there. But she is now a very old woman, in her 90s, and she doesn't remember a thing. She is Polish, of course. The apartment survived the war. The first time I went back there after the war was when I was in the military, I was traveling on business and had to go through Radomsko and so I made a stop there. I looked around and somehow... I felt no desire to stay. After the war I sold the house, I got close to nothing for it – but what was the point of holding on to it? All that is still there, even the shed where we stayed [in the ghetto]. I also showed Jozefina the Sports Plaza, which is there till this day.

Glossary

1 Jews in Radomsko: the Jewish community in Radomsko was founded in 1822. Soon rebe Szlomo ha-Kohen Rabinowicz (1803-1866) settled there and started a Hasidic court, the third largest establishment of this kind in Poland (second only to Ger and Aleksandrow), and a well known

yeshivah. The first synagogue was built in the 1820s, the second one towards the end of the 19th century. In 1897 there were 11.7 thousand Jews living in Radomsko – 43% of the population. Most of the Jews of Radomsko made their living in crafts; there was an active tailors' union. In 1898 the first Zionist organization was established; in 1905 the local Bund was founded. The most important figures of the religious community in the inter-war period were activists of Agudat Israel, while two representatives of Poalei Zion were members of the City Council. During the great economic crisis of the 1930s the Jewish population decreased by one half; many people emigrated to Palestine

2 Polonization of Jewish first and last names

the Polonization of first and last names in the 19th century was mostly an effect and a symptom of assimilation. Representatives of the so-called assimilatory trend changed their names or added a Polish element to the name. Later, this tendency was not restricted to the assimilatory circle. In the interwar period Jews often had two names: the Jewish name (in the Hebrew or Yiddish version): the official name, written down on the birth certificate and the Polish name, used in everyday contacts with Poles, but also among family. The story of the Polish-Jewish historian Schiper is an interesting case of the variety of names used by Polish Jews. Schiper published his works under three different names: Izaak, Icchak and Ignacy. After WWII many Jews who survived the Holocaust in hiding under false names never returned to their pre-war names. Legal regulations after the war enabled this procedure. Such a situation was caused by the lack of a feeling of security and post-war trauma, which showed itself in breaking off ties with one's group. Another reason for the Polonization of names after WWII was the pressure exerted by the communist authorities on Jews - members of the communist party and employed in the party apparatus.

3 Pilsudski, Jozef (1867-1935)

Polish activist in the independence cause, politician, statesman, marshal. With regard to the cause of Polish independence he represented the pro-Austrian current, which believed that the Polish state would be reconstructed with the assistance of Austria-Hungary. When Poland regained its independence in January 1919, he was elected Head of State by the Legislative Sejm. In March 1920 he was nominated marshal, and until December 1922 he held the positions of Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army. After the murder of the president, Gabriel Narutowicz, he resigned from all his posts and withdrew from politics. He returned in 1926 in a political coup. He refused the presidency offered to him, and in the new government held the posts of war minister and general inspector of the armed forces. He was prime minister twice, from 1926-1928 and in 1930. He worked to create a system of national security by concluding bilateral non-aggression pacts with the USSR (1932) and Germany (1934). He sought opportunities to conclude firm alliances with France and Britain. In 1932 owing to his deteriorating health, Pilsudski resigned from his functions. He was buried in the Crypt of Honor in Wawel Cathedral in the Royal Castle in Cracow.

4 Polish Legions: a military formation operating in the period 1914-17, formally subordinate to the Austro-Hungarian army but fighting for Polish independence. Commanded by Jozef Pilsudski. From 1915 the Legions came under German command, but some of the Legionnaires refused, which led to the collapse of the organization.

5 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.

6 Hakoah: Max Nordau's call for the creation of a 'new Jew' and for 'muscular Judaism' at the second World Zionist Congress in 1898 that marked the beginning of a new awareness of physical culture among Jews, particularly in Europe. At the turn of the century, Jewish gymnastics clubs were established, both encouraging the Jewish youth to engage in physical exercise and also serving as a framework for nationalistic activity. Beginning in 1906, broader-based sports clubs were also established. Most prominent in the interwar period were the Hakoah Club of Vienna and Hagibor Club of Prague, whose notable achievements in national and international track and field and swimming competitions aroused pride and a shared sense of identity among the European Jewry. The greatest of them all was the Hakoah soccer team, which won the Austrian championship in 1925. The best Jewish soccer players in Central Europe joined its ranks, bringing the team worldwide acclaim. Today Hakoah clubs exist all over the world and mainly represent the community as a social club. However, the original pursuit of soccer remains high on the list of the clubs' activities.

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

8 The Radomsko Ghetto: established on 20thDecember 1939 as one of the first ghettos in Poland. About 14 thousand people were enclosed in it, including persons brought from the Warta region and from nearby towns and villages. The inhabitants worked in shoe-making and sewing workshops, and in the city's cleaning services. Hundreds of young people were sent to labor camps. On 9th and 12thOctober 1942 inhabitants of the ghetto were deported to the extermination center in Treblinka. 175 persons were sent to a camp in Skarzysko-Kamienna, 150 were kept in Radomsko in order to clean up the ghetto and put in order the goods left behind by those murdered. On 14th October a secondary ghetto was established, with 4,000 Jews from Zarki, Wodzislaw and Pilica. On 6th January 1943 they were murdered in Treblinka. After the war 200 Jews returned to Radomsko.

9 Navy-Blue Police, or Polish Police of the General Governorship: the name of the communal police which operated between 1939 and 1945 in the districts of the General Governorship. Navy-Blue

police was subordinate to the order police (so-called Orpo, Ordungpolizei). Members were forcibly employed officers of the pre-war Polish state police. Navy-Blue Policemen participated, for example, in deportations of residents, in suppressing the 'black market', in isolating Jews in ghettoes. Some members participated in cells of the underground state and passed on information about the functioning of the German forces.

10 Treblinka

village in Poland's Mazovia region, site of two camps. The first was a penal labor camp, established in 1941 and operating until 1944. The second, known as Treblinka II, functioned in the period 1942-43 and was a death camp. Prisoners in the former worked in Treblinka II. In the second camp a ramp and a mock-up of a railway station were built, which prevented the victims from realizing what awaited them until just in front of the entrance to the gas chamber. The camp covered an area of 13.5 hectares. It was bounded by a 3-m high barbed wire fence interwoven densely with pine branches to screen what was going on inside. The whole process of exterminating a transport from arrival in the camp to removal of the corpses from the gas chamber took around 2 hours. Several transports arrived daily. In the 13 months of the extermination camp's existence the Germans gassed some 750,000-800,000 Jews. Those taken to Treblinka included Warsaw Jews during the Grossaktion [great liquidation campaign] in the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942. As well as Polish Jews, Jews from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Yugoslavia and the USSR were also killed in Treblinka. In the spring of 1943 the Germans gradually began to liquidate the camp. On 2 August 1943 an uprising broke out there with the aim of enabling some 200 people to escape. The majority died.

11 Lodz Ghetto

It was set up in February 1940 city in the former Jewish quarter on the northern outskirts of the city. 164,000 Jews from Lodz were packed together in a 4 sq. km. area. In 1941 and 1942, 38,500 more Jews were deported to the ghetto. In November 1941, 5,000 Roma were also deported to the ghetto from Burgenland province, Austria. The Jewish self-government, led by Mordechai Rumkowsky, sought to make the ghetto as productive as possible and to put as many inmates to work as he could. But not even this could prevent overcrowding and hunger or improve the inhuman living conditions. As a result of epidemics, shortages of fuel and food and insufficient sanitary conditions, about 43,500 people (21% of all the residents of the ghetto) died of undernourishment, cold and illness. The others were transported to death camps; only a very small number of them survived.

12 Home Army (Armia Krajowa - AK): conspiratorial military organization, part of the Polish armed forces operating within Polish territory (within pre-1 September 1939 borders) during World War II. Created on 14 February 1942, subordinate to the Supreme Commander and the Polish Government in Exile. Its mission was to regain Poland's sovereignty through armed combat and inciting to a national uprising. In 1943 the AK had over 300,000 members. AK units organized diversion, sabotage, revenge and partisan campaigns. Its military intelligence was highly successful. On 19th January 1945 the AK was disbanded on the order of its commander, but some of its members continued their independence activities throughout 1945-47. In 1944-45 tens of thousands of AK soldiers were exiled and interned in the USSR, in places such as Ryazan, Borovichi and Ostashkov.

Soldiers of the AK continued to suffer repression in Poland until 1956; many were sentenced to death or long-term imprisonment on trumped-up charges. Directly after the war, official propaganda accused the Home Army of murdering Jews who were hiding in the forests. There is no doubt that certain AK units as well as some individuals tied to AK were in fact guilty of such acts. The scale of this phenomenon is very difficult to determine, and has been the object of debates among historians.

13 The Jewish Historical Institute [Zydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH)]: Warsaw-based academic institution devoted to researching the history and culture of Polish Jews. Founded in 1947 from the Central Jewish Historical Committee, an arm of the Central Committee for Polish Jews. ZIH houses an archive center and library whose stocks include the books salvaged from the libraries of the Templum Synagogue and the Institute of Judaistica, and the documents comprising the Ringelblum Archive. ZIH also has exhibition rooms where its collection of liturgical items and Jewish painting are on display, and an exhibition dedicated to the Warsaw ghetto. Initially the institute devoted its research activities solely to the Holocaust, but over the last dozen or so years it has broadened the scope of its historical and cultural work. In 1993 ZIH was brought under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. It publishes the Jewish Historical Institute Quarterly.

14 Warsaw Ghetto

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

15 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (or April Uprising)

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

16 Placowka

literally 'station' (Polish), the place of work of Jews employed outside the ghetto. Jewish workers

used to work for example on the railroad, in private German companies, in businesses and institutions SS, police and Wehrmacht, and also in city administration. Jewish workers lived in the ghetto and every day were leaving for many hours to work outside the ghetto. They were paid for their work with a modest meal, sometimes small amount of money. 'Placowki' existed since the beginning of occupation, their number grew in the spring of 1942. During liquidation actions in the ghettos their employees were often protected, at least for some time, from deportation to a death camp.

17 **Kenkarta:** (Ger. *Kennkarte* – ID card) confirmed the identity and place of residence of its holder. It bore a photograph, a thumbprint, and the address and signature of its holder. It was the only document of its type issued to Poles during the Nazi occupation.

18 **Warsaw Uprising 1944**

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

19 Internal Security Corpus [KBW: Korpus Bezpieczenstwa Wewnetrznego] military formation subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Security, established in March 1945 in order to defeat Polish anti-communist conspiracy as well as the German and Ukrainian underground. From May 1945 B. Kieniewicz was the commander in chief. The seed from which KBW developed was the Independent Polish Battalion, established in 1943, subordinate to the Union of Polish Patriots in the USSR – a unit whose task was to gather intelligence for the Red Army on occupied territories. In 1945 KBW consisted of as many as 29,000 soldiers, a number that grew to 41,000 by 1951, when it was highest. Units of KBW took part in pacifying villages that supported the anticommunist underground and the legal opposition, i.e. the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), as well as provided 'security' services during the 1946 referendum and the 1947 elections. They were also in charge of the 'Wisla' campaign, which consisted in forceful expulsion of Ukrainians from the southern part of Poland; they supervised the largest industrial sites; the war prisoner camps, and the prisons. In 1965 KBW was made subordinate directly to the Ministry of National Defense.

20 **Jewish Self-Help Committees**

spontaneous committees of Jewish self-help were established on territories liberated from German occupation, with the aim of providing material, medical and legal support to Jews who were revealing their identity. The committees established contact with the Department for Aid to Jewish Population, which was created in August 1944 by the PKWN (Polish Committee of National Liberation, the first communist government on Polish land) and they received resources via the PKWN. When the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKZP) was established in 1944, the local committees subordinated themselves to the central one. New ones were created at the same time as local representation of the CKZP. In June 1946 there were 9 committees at regional level, 7 district ones and 50 at the local level. The committees organized orphanages, soup kitchens for the

poor, schools, boarding houses, and shelters for the homeless. They registered persons who came to them, provided assistance in searches for family members, offered financial help, as well as help in finding employment. Their activity was mainly funded the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint).

21 Anti-Zionist campaign in Poland

From 1962-1967 a campaign got underway to sack Jews employed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the army and the central administration. The background to this anti-Semitic campaign was the involvement of the Socialist Bloc countries on the Arab side in the Middle East conflict, in connection with which Moscow ordered purges in state institutions. On 19th June 1967 at a trade union congress the then First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party [PZPR], Wladyslaw Gomulka, accused the Jews of a lack of loyalty to the state and of publicly demonstrating their enthusiasm for Israel's victory in the Six-Day-War. This address marked the start of purges among journalists and creative professions. Poland also severed diplomatic relations with Israel. On 8th March 1968 there was a protest at Warsaw University. The Ministry of Internal Affairs responded by launching a press campaign and organizing mass demonstrations in factories and workplaces during which 'Zionists' and 'trouble-makers' were indicted and anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia slogans shouted. After the events of March purges were also staged in all state institutions, from factories to universities, on criteria of nationality and race. 'Family liability' was also introduced (e.g. with respect to people whose spouses were Jewish). Jews were forced to emigrate. From 1968-1971 15,000-30,000 people left Poland. They were stripped of their citizenship and right of return.

22 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.

23 Kielce Pogrom

On 4th July 1946 the alleged kidnapping of a Polish boy led to a pogrom in which 42 people were killed and over 40 wounded. The pogrom also prompted other anti-Jewish incidents in Kielce region. These events caused mass emigrations of Jews to Israel and other countries.

24 Jews settling in Lower Silesia after World War II

The Jews of the German province of Silesia either emigrated or were killed during the Nazi regime. In 1939 there were 15,480 Jews living in the region, most of whom perished during the war. A new influx of Jews began in 1945 after the region was incorporated into Poland. Of the 52,000 or so Jews that arrived there (mostly from Eastern Poland incorporated into the Soviet Union), 10,000 settled in Wroclaw (Breslau), others moved mainly to Legnica (Liegnitz), Dzierzoniow (Reichenbach) and Walbrzych (Waldenburg).

25 The Association of Jewish War Veterans and Victims of Prosecutions during World War Two

an organization of Jewish war veterans, who had taken part in armed struggle against the Nazi Germany, and were victims of Holocaust persecution. The organization was founded in 1991. It has 13 sections throughout Poland, and 150 members. Its aims include providing help to Jews who were victimized during the war and spreading knowledge about the struggle and victimization of Jews during WWII. The Association established the Medal of the 50th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which is granted to persons who have made important contributions to Polish-Jewish life and dialogue.

26 Jewish Religious Community (Gmina) in Warsaw is one of 8 communities associated within the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Republic of Poland, and one of over a dozen Jewish organizations active in Poland today

Together, these organizations make up Poland's Jewish community. The Community (Gmina) was reactivated in 1997 and has 400 members today. Many of them are non-religious Jews, but the community's Nozyk synagogue is an orthodox one. The community's activities are mostly religious in nature, but there are also educational and cultural events. Social work is undertaken jointly with the Social Support Section of SGWZ, part of which is the support offered to the Seniors' Club. As a legal continuation of the pre-war community, the community administrates its own property, recovered during the recent years, as well as Jewish graveyards.

27 Children of the Holocaust Association – a social organization whose members were persecuted during the Nazi occupation due to their Jewish identity, and who were no more than 13 years old in 1939, or were born during the war

The Association was founded in 1991. Its purpose is to provide mutual support (psychological assistance; help in searching for family members), and to educate the public. The group organizes seminars, publishes a bulletin as well as books (several volumes of memoirs: 'Children of the Holocaust Speak...') The Association has now almost 800 members; there are sections in Warsaw, Wroclaw, Cracow and Gdansk.

28 TSKZ (Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews)

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

29 Nozyk Synagogue

The only synagogue in Warsaw not destroyed during World War II or shortly afterwards. Built at the

beginning of the 20th century from a foundation set up by a couple called Nozyk, it serves the Warsaw Jewish Community as a house of prayer today. The Nozyk Synagogue is near Grzybowski Square, where the majority of Warsaw’s Jewish organizations and institutions are situated.