

Beniamin Szwarc



This is my father, Beniamin Szwarc, walking on the street in Lodz in 1930.

I do not know who took this picture. It survived the war due to a fortunate accident: before the war, my mother had mailed it to her sister, Ruth, who lived in the USA.

My father completed three or four classes of elementary school. When he was nine or ten years old his parents sent him off to learn to be a shoemaker.

But after two to four days Father came home and said he would not go back there. He said one could learn to repair shoes in just a few days, and this was not for him.

Then they tried to make him into a tailor but that didn't work out either. Finally, he discovered electro-technology. He studied it as someone's apprentice. This is how people learned their trades in those days.

As far back as I can remember, my father was always working as an electrician. This was quite an exclusive profession in those days, when electric light was only being developed.

When someone's lighting broke down, they would call my father and he would repair it. His entire workshop fit into a single briefcase – inside it, he had an inductor, a few screwdrivers, and some other small things. My father went to work in the same clothes he wore all day long.

He didn't make much money, we were quite poor. He would be gone all day, but he always came home for lunch at 2pm. We would all sit at the table, each person at their own place at the table and we would all have lunch together.

Papa did not serve in the military. In order to avoid being recruited into the Russian army, he had cut off two of his toes. [Editor's note: men recruited into the tsarist army would spend 25 years in service – hence common cases of self-mutilation, a method of avoiding military service.]

This was not a serious disability, he could walk normally, and you didn't see it when he was walking. Quite simply, I knew about this because I saw it many times, and generally, it was a well known fact in the family.

My father did some reading, but he was more interested in the press. He read some Jewish paper, I think it was in Yiddish. I know for sure that my parents both knew Yiddish, but they spoke Polish with each other.

I remember also that they spoke Polish with their siblings. Papa had leftist sympathies, but he didn't have any strong political commitments either. I know that he was a sort of militant atheist, and my mother didn't like this at all.