Eugenia Berger

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Poland
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Eugenia Berger has been working at 'Dos Yidishe Wort' 1 for 35 years. She proofs articles written in Yiddish. She is a very elegant woman.

Our subject often seemed trivial to her – 'Who is going to be interested in my family?', she would ask. But in the course of our conversation memories slowly began to come back to her, and new stories cropped up.

We met twice in her apartment in a beautiful part of Warsaw not far from the city center. She lives alone; none of her closest relations are alive any more.

I also visited her at work, at the headquarters of 'Dos Yidishe Wort.'

- **My family background**

My family is Jewish through and through; my father's side of the family came from Wilno and my mother's side from Latvia. I don't remember either of my grandfathers or my grandmother on my father's side. They died before I was born. All I know about my grandmother on my father's side is that I was named after her – Eugenia.

But I remember my maternal Grandma Weiner well. She brought us up; she lived with us. She was a truly fantastic grandmother! We all loved our grandma to pieces. It may sound strange, but I can't remember her name. We always called her 'Grandma'; we never used her name.

Grandma was from Dzwinsk. I never went there because by the time I was born Dzwinsk was abroad [Latvia]. Grandma was very energetic and cheerful. My sister used to say that it was Grandma that I inherited my energy from, not Mama.

It was Grandma who looked after us. She washed our hair, she dressed us and changed us, because Mama couldn't manage on her own – there were eight of us children at home. Nothing was impossible for Grandma. In her view there was a remedy for everything. Often, when Father needed something sorted out at the bank or at a government office, he would ask Grandma to go and do it for him. Everyone knew her. She knew how to deal with people.

Grandma came from a very rich family. She was very rich herself, too. Back before World War I, she had a shop selling furs in Dzwinsk. But then she had to escape. At home we had a beautiful silver samovar and an accounts ledger that had survived from that time.

The story about that ledger went that it contained the names of everyone who had ever taken goods from the shop on credit. It used to be said that if Grandma could recoup all those debts she would probably be a multi-billionaire.

Was Grandma religious? At home it was Mama who kept kosher. I have the feeling that my grandmother was worldlier but Mama was very religious. Grandma did go to the synagogue, of course, at Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah – the high holidays, and on Saturdays. But like some people used to: always sitting around in the synagogue – there was none of that!

Grandma lived to a very old age; she died just before the war, in 1939 – she was 90-something. I was not at home then. I was probably on vacation. When I came back, they told me that Grandma had died. Her funeral was very solemn. An awful lot of people came, because everyone had known her. She was buried in Wilno Jewish cemetery.

There were ten people in our family – father, mother, five daughters and three sons. It doesn't seem necessary to me to describe them all here. What can I say about them? Well, all right.

My father was called Herzl Chanion. He was born in Wilno in 1895. What did he do? My father was a true expert. He had a huge, huge workshop. After all, he had to earn enough to keep such a big family. He was a men's tailor. He had very good employees and he was a master tailor.

Father's firm was in the house opposite our apartment. About 20 people worked there. It has to be said, though, that it wasn't a tailor's for everyone – the people who came to my father were the very, very best people. Father made gala dress for generals, army officers, and for the rich and wealthy. He had a lot of regular customers, not just from Wilno. A few very rich people came to his shop every year from Warsaw.

My father was blond. All my brothers and sisters and I inherited his light hair and fair complexion. And for that reason nobody believed that we were Jewish. My father had a beautifully groomed moustache. He was very elegant. He could not but be elegant – he was one of the best tailors. Indeed, to this day my friends say of me, 'Ah yes, she is her father's daughter,' because I like to dress very smartly, too.

My mama was called Sonia. She was born in Dzwinsk in 1896. She was an only child. Her maiden name was Weiner. As I mentioned, she was from Latvia. She was very religious. Mama didn't wear a wig; she had beautiful hair. She would fasten it up in a bun. She was not from a Hasidic family 2.

She was just devout, she observed the rules, kept up traditions, but she didn't wear a wig. [Editor's note: At that time wigs were worn not only by Hasidic women, but also by many women belonging to other Orthodox Jewish traditions.]

She dressed very elegantly. Well, no low necklines, of course, because that was not the done thing then, but my Mama was a very smart, very beautiful woman. She kept house. There were eight of us, so keeping such a house was really very hard work. I should also say that my Mama was a socialist. She didn't belong to any party, but I remember her singing Jewish revolutionary songs in Yiddish.

I don't even know how my parents met. If I'd been an only child I'm sure I would have asked about all things like that. But there were so many of us that there wasn't even time to ask. All I know is that my father was a very handsome man and Mama a very smart woman. I'm sure they met somewhere and fell in love. When they got married Mama was 17 and Father 18.

My eldest sister, Cyla – her married surname was Kopsztel – held right-wing views. She belonged to Betar 3, and was a Zionist. She was a leader in her organization. They sent her on hakhsharah 4. In 1930 she immigrated to Palestine. She was 19 then. She ended up in a right-wing kibbutz. She lives in Israel to this day. She is 90 now. Only she and I survived; all the rest of the family died in the [Wilno] ghetto 5.

The first boy in our family was Mordechaj. He was four years younger than me. There were already four girls, and still no boy. God, what joy there was when he was born. And after that, there might not be enough for us, but there was always enough for him. He was very clever, and liked studying. First he went to cheder, and later to a yeshivah.

When he got a bit older, he would never let me forget one particular story. Well, he would always get chocolate and I never did... He was very small at the time – he couldn't read or write yet. He would always come to me and ask me to read him stories. I would take him to my room – so that nobody would see – and say: 'Give me some chocolate and I'll read to you.' And he would give it to me; he really loved being read to. And later on he would never let me forget that I used to take that chocolate off him.

I remember his bar mitzvah, too. Lord... the goings-on, the goings-on! Mordechaj dressed in the tallit, in the tefillin, stood in the synagogue and read from the Torah and gave a speech. He was a very good student, so it was beautiful. And then we came home, and at home the table was already laid with all the good things in the world. And so many guests, and so many of us.

Mordechaj was given a lot of presents. Most importantly, he got a bicycle from Father. That was his dream, you see. From other people he got mostly money. Some people, such as our neighbors, brought homemade cakes with them. One neighbor brought spice cake. How tasty it was! To this day I remember the smell and the taste!

The rest of our brothers and sisters were small children. I'm not going to describe them here. I don't want to talk about it any more.

- **Growing up**

I was born in Wilno in 1918, the third child in our family. I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair 6. In our organization we often had lectures about Israel [then still Palestine]. All the young people were preparing to immigrate to Palestine. We would go on hakhsharah, too. We were very involved young people. We all wore uniforms: gray blouses and navy blue skirts and gray panama hats. Our group was co-educational. Both students and grammar-school children belonged to it.

I went to a Jewish school, where the language of instruction was Yiddish, and after that to a training college run by YIVO 7. I often performed at school – I recited poems. When I was in the third grade we held a celebration in honor of Sholem Aleichem 8, Peretz 9 and An-ski 10, our Jewish writers. I was very fond of poetry, so if ever there was anything to be recited the teachers always came to me.

When I was still in third grade they invited the sixth-graders in to see me reciting. I'll never forget that. I got so many ovations, and my teacher came up to me and kissed me on the forehead. Then she went to my parents and praised me. She said that I was bound to become an actress.

As regards religious education, all my brothers went to cheder, and then to yeshivah, and we girls went to the Tanach elementary school. We even had special Hebrew-Yiddish dictionaries so that we would understand everything fully.

I remember, too, that we were always having discussions among ourselves. Of the eight of us, you see, four of us belonged to different organizations. Cyla was in Betar, I belonged to Hashomer Hatzair, another of my sisters was in the Bund 11, and Mordechaj went to yeshivah and was very religious. We were always arguing, especially during the elections to the various organizations. We would even come to blows over whom to vote for in elections to various councils and youth organizations.

We all had our own affairs. We rarely sat around at home. We all had our friends. We would come home after school, do our homework and then off we would go to a friend's house, for walks, to parties; we would go to the woods and down to the river. Whenever anyone came to our house, they were always surprised: 'Such a big family – where are all the people?'

When we were little we never went to bed without a story. Mama told us the most stories – about gnomes, about Little Red Riding Hood, and other children's stories. Sometimes Grandma told us stories, too, but Grandma mostly sang us songs in Yiddish. Many of them I remember to this day.

At home we only spoke Yiddish. The exception was Cyla, who did first grade in Polish, so she knew the language. But all of us, all the rest of us went to the Jewish school and only spoke Yiddish.

We were considered a rich family. And now I always say, 'Yes, eight children is a great wealth.' Our apartment was in a burgher house, and we had a yard, too. There was lots of greenery all around. The house was fenced off, and at night we closed the gate. In the house opposite, where my father's workshop was, there was even a night watchman with his family. There was so much material there that it had to be guarded.

We had a huge apartment in a house in the center of Wilno. Five large rooms, a big bathroom and lavatory, a spacious dining room – we needed it. All of us sisters slept in one room; we each had our own bed. The boys had their own room, too. We had running water. As for electricity, I don't

remember how it was exactly. We burned candles and lamps. I know that when electric light came in it was like a new era – a new life.

In our apartment there were a lot of books; all of us collected something. Cyla had a whole library in Polish. I used to go to the Jewish library almost every day and borrow something to read. What interested me most were the Yiddish classics I mentioned before– Sholem Aleichem, Peretz and An-ski.

We had a kosher household. Always, right up until the outbreak of war. God forbid that something not kosher should turn up – I don't even know what would have happened then. If they found out then they wouldn't even have let us in the synagogue. My mother was particularly careful in that respect.

Once we were older we didn't have to be so careful. But our household remained kosher to the last minute. We would have shuddered if we'd had to go and buy sausage, for example, from a Christian. There were special Jewish shops where the tastiest sausages were sold.

There were two cupboards in the kitchen. One was painted white and the other brown. The first was for dairy crockery, and the other for meat. And God forbid that anyone mix them up. If Mama saw someone putting a meat plate into the dairy cupboard, she would throw the plate away at once.

I have to admit that I was always a 'naughty' girl. I really didn't like potatoes. If I even saw a potato in my soup that was it – I couldn't eat it. One day I knew that it was going to be vegetable soup with potatoes for lunch. When I was setting the table I took one plate from the dairy cupboard on purpose and put it in front of my chair. Mama didn't notice until she had served us all with soup. At once she took the plate, poured my portion away, smashed the plate and threw it in the garbage.

Of course, I had to be punished: I didn't get another portion of soup. I must say that I was very pleased with that punishment, because I couldn't look at that soup. That's what a rogue I was. It was unthinkable that anyone should play such pranks on Mama in our house. They were more traditional and obedient than me.

We had help at home, too. She was a young girl, a Pole. Her name was Stanislawa. There is a whole story connected with her. We had a neighbor who had a daughter. The little girl's father died when she was still very small. When she was 16, her mother died, too.

Then it transpired that before her death, the mother had come to my father – Father was known for his goodness – and said that she was very ill. She already knew that she would die soon; she was very poor and probably didn't have any money to get treatment.

So she came to Father and asked him, if after her death he would take care of her daughter. She said, 'You have eight children, take her in. She will help.' Then my father said, 'May you live even to 100; what you ask I will certainly do.' The woman died shortly afterwards and my father kept his promise and one day brought the girl to our house and said, 'She is going to live with us, she will go to school; I will take care of everything.' And that was Stanislawa. She lived with us as if we were one family.

When the war broke out the Germans came and threw us all out of the house and took us to the ghetto. Then she resolved to go with us. There were some Lithuanians there [Lithuanian members of divisions collaborating with the Nazis], and they said to her, ‘What nonsense are you talking; we know you are a Christian, get out of here!’ But she said, ‘No,’ and went with us. I was told that she died along with my family in the ghetto.

On Friday evenings before we went to the synagogue, Mama would light the candles. Mama had a beautiful shawl wrapped around her head and we were all dressed in our best clothes, too. We prayed with the candles lit. Then Father went with my brothers to the synagogue, and we girls went with Mama.

When we were very small, we all went in a line, holding hands. We went to a synagogue that was in our neighborhood, on Zawalna Street. It was a very large synagogue. Afterwards, at home, we all stood around the table and when the blessing over the challah was said, we all said, ‘Amen.’

When we came back from the synagogue in the evening the table was already set with dishes that had been prepared earlier. There always had to be gefilte fish. At home the challot were always baked beforehand as well, and then they lay on the table covered with a white napkin.

We always ate chicken noodle soup and then for the second course there was always meat, but cooked so well, so aromatic, and various side dishes, and tsimes, there had to be. Tsimes is made of carrot to which raisins, prunes and sugar are added. It is all stewed together in the oven until it browns and goes very tasty.

The next day, Saturday, there was also a feast. Father prayed over the challot and we all stood around and at the end we would say, ‘Amen.’ Later on, when my brother was a little older, ten years old, he started saying the prayers over the challah, and when he was 13, he said all the prayers. Then we would sit down to eat.

Because cooking wasn’t permitted on Saturday, everything was prepared on Friday and kept warm. How they did it, so that it stayed warm, didn’t interest me, I was still young and I didn’t care, as long as the food was tasty.

On Saturdays we ate chulent and kigl [kugel]. Chulent I know how to make myself, but what Mama made kigl from I don’t remember exactly. There were eight of us – there would have been a to-do if we had all gone into the kitchen to watch Mama cooking. In any case, we children waited for those Fridays and Saturdays as if for the Lord’s coming. That food was exceptional. I was simply in raptures; it was all so tasty.

The greatest holiday for us children was Pesach. When the holiday was drawing near, Father would take us all to the shoe shop. As Father commanded great respect, so as soon as we all entered the shop, the owner came over at once and called, ‘Please put chairs, armchairs, out for these folk!’ And no wonder, really – after all, Father was buying eight pairs of shoes at once. So we would all sit down on the chairs and armchairs and the fitting would begin: slippers for some, boots for others.

Afterward, all the rest had to be bought: new dresses and stockings. We would go from shop to shop, holding each other by the hands. We were kitted out from top to toe after that shopping trip.

Then the owners of the food shops would come to see Father – the Jewish ones, of course. They pleaded and begged him to buy from them. After all, he had to buy food for eight days. Everything had to be kosher – and how kosher – extra-kosher! The Pesach dishes were brought down from the attic; they were kept there all year in a special trunk. Can there be any more beautiful memory – all those silver cups and the cutlery silver, too.

I was very fussy – one day Grandma had gone out and bought a beautiful teaspoon especially for me. Silver underneath and gold on top, and it had had a rose engraved on it for her. Nobody other than me had the right to use that spoon. Pesach was the most beautiful holiday, ah, how I used to love it.

At Sukkot a shelter [sukkah] was set up in our yard. We had to call the workers in and they would knock up this shack from planks of wood. It was covered with fir and spruce branches on top, and inside it was light and there were candles burning. But not everybody was allowed to go into that shelter: only Father and the boys. Supper was prepared for them in there. And we were only allowed to go and see it during the day.

What I remember most about Chanukkah are the presents and the lighting of the candles. To this day I have beautiful Chanukkah lamps at home. It was like this: every evening of Chanukkah we would stand by the window and every day another light was lit – eight candles, for eight days, and one was lit all the time – the shammash. It was used to light all the others.

As for vacations, yes, we did go away, but never all the family together. Firstly there were too many of us; it would have been very expensive, and secondly Father had his business, so he couldn't go with us. Sometimes I went with Mama, but usually we children went away on school camps, and even more often than that on trips out of town.

Wilno, what can I say about Wilno? They always used to say that it was the second Jerusalem; an awful lot of Jews lived there. You could walk the streets without worry; everybody spoke Yiddish without lowering their voices, without embarrassment. The signs on the shops were in Yiddish at the top and in Polish underneath. There were a lot of synagogues there, and a yeshivah on every street. There were theaters, concert halls and libraries.

The headquarters of YIVO was also in Wilno. There were a lot of different political organizations, too. The intelligentsia mostly belonged to Hashomer Hatzair. There was the Bund, too; they propagated Yiddish and were against Hebrew. And there was the right-wing Betar. I couldn't possibly list all the organizations.

As for Polish-Jewish relations, I have to say that until 1936 I really experienced no anti-Semitism. Our neighbors were Polish, and we never knew any nastiness from them. I had one good friend, who was Polish, and my sister Cyla, as I said, went to a Polish school – she even won a medal for her studies – and all her friends were Polish.

It was only after the death of Pilsudski 12, in 1936, that it all started at the university. 'Right side for Poles, left side for Jews' [see Anti-Jewish Legislation in Poland] 13. Poles could sit down during lectures, but Jews had to stand. Students beat up young Jews on the street. It was awful.

- **During the war**

Then the boycotts of Jewish shops started. Poles would stand at the doors and watch to make sure that other goyim didn't go into those shops. One day I even got beaten up for going into a Jewish store. Mama asked me to go and buy something for her. So I'm going into the shop and they start to hit me with this stick. 'You Jewish flunky!' they shouted at me. I burst into tears, because it really hurt. And all because I was blonde and didn't look like most Jewish girls, and they took me for a goy.

In fact, I have to say that anti-Semitism has always been around, as long as Poland has been Poland: a millennium of anti-Semitism. They used to say, in small towns, in villages and everywhere, that the Jew must be beaten, because they slaughter Christian babies and take the blood for matzah [blood libel]. What more do you need?

And then just after the war there was that pogrom [the Kielce Pogrom] 14. There too, it all started with a little boy being hidden, and immediately the rumor went round that the Jews had kidnapped him for matzah.

In 1939 the Russians came and then the Germans. We were taken to the ghetto. Of the whole family, only I and my sister Cyla, who was already in Palestine by then, survived. The rest of the family was shot in Ponary 15.

I escaped on the fourth day after they put us in the ghetto. I was very lucky I was young. A whole group of us, young people, left the ghetto. Then, sleeping in the woods, we walked east. That was right at the beginning of the war. If they'd caught us, it would have been back to the ghetto and we'd have been sent to our deaths.

In the end we made it over onto the Soviet Union side. And there it all started. We found it very hard. We were searched, they started interrogating us, but they didn't lock us up in prison. We went to work in a kolkhoz 16. Then I escaped from the kolkhoz and got to Smolensk. I don't want to talk about that any more.

In Smolensk – I will be honest – I netted a very high-ranking Russian. He was a general, and a senior military prosecutor. He was 16 years older than me. I was 22 at the time, and what did I have? I was poor, I had nobody in the world, nothing to live on, but I must admit that I was pretty. He was attractive, too – handsome, elegant.

The Russian women were crazy about him, and he would call me 'child,' 'child' – I was a child to him. Times were different then. I married him and we lived together in Smolensk. I have no more to say on the subject.

Then in 1949 the men from the NKVD 17 came and took me away. They threw my husband out of the Party. They accused him of marrying a woman with anti-Soviet views. They were carrying out these purges in the army at that time, and the same thing happened to everyone who had a Jewish wife.

They accused me of spying for Hitler. They wanted to give me 25 years, but they didn't have any evidence that I was a spy. So they changed the charge. They said I was a cosmopolitan 18. They

sentenced me to ten years. I was sent to a camp, to Kolyma 19.

My husband did what he could to stop them sending me there; he knew that I was an innocent child. He knew what was behind it all. When the sentence was passed on me he went home and shot himself because he hadn't been able to save me. That's it, there's nothing more to say about it.

The NKVD officials took everything I had, even the family photographs that I'd managed to take with me and then smuggle out of the ghetto. Not to mention my gold rings and things like that. They never gave anything back. They deported me to a camp deep in Siberia, in Kolyma. There is only sky and tundra there. Nothing grows there. In winter only mountains and ice: to have water to boil you have to chop up blocks of ice.

Our camp was just for women. We worked, in very harsh conditions. If anyone has read Solzhenitsyn 20, they know what it was like there. Our camp was 30 kilometers away from the one where Solzhenitsyn was. We were there at more or less the same time.

There were not only Jews there. We were from different places: from cities, small towns, even from the country. There were German women there, too, and one Englishwoman. I remember that Englishwoman well. She had been a language teacher in Moscow. A Russian, an old general, had taken a fancy to her. She didn't want to get involved with him, so he dealt with her by having her sent to Kolyma. She was so fragile and delicate; she was perhaps 19. My God, how sorry I felt for her.

I was supposed to sit out my ten years there, but they let me out after seven. That was after Stalin died. Khrushchev 21 said then that those eight million innocent people sentenced to Kolyma had to be released. I was released after seven years' work in hunger and cold, in the most terrible conditions.

That was in 1955. I was put on a train. Twelve days later I arrived in Moscow. They wanted to send me to a kolkhoz in some village in Belarus. They thought that all we people liberated from the camps were anti-Soviet. They didn't want us spreading propaganda, talking about the conditions in the camps.

I didn't want to go to a kolkhoz for anything in the world. So I got out in Moscow and went straight to the NKVD. How did I look then? Like I was straight out of a camp: I was hungry, I dreamed of just a slice of bread, I had no money, no food, no home, but I was young, pretty and audacious. I thought, 'What can I lose, when I've already lost everything? I have no-one, I have nothing.'

So I went to the commissariat and told the NKVD officer on duty that I was there on a very important matter, and that I had to speak to the chief of chiefs, and nobody else. The duty officer looked at me dubiously and said, 'Sir, there is a citizen here to see you, she's got some important matter to speak to you about, she can't reveal what, can you see her?'

[Editor's note: Instead of 'Sir' probably 'Comrade' was used in the conversation according to the contemporary communist jargon.] And his door was open, he looked at me like so and said, 'Let her in.'

- **After the war and later years**

And there and then I said to him that I had come to him as to my own father, that I had nobody, that I had come out of a camp, that I had been rehabilitated [see Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union] 22. And at the end I said, ‘I have come to ask for help.

I have no work, nowhere to live. Look, I’m young and healthy, how can I go and live under a bridge? Sir, can you imagine that for 24 hours now not a thing has passed my lips, because I haven’t got any money to buy food with and I have no-one.’ That moved him; he stroked my head and said, ‘I was just on my way to a restaurant for lunch, come with me, child.’ So I went.

When we walked into the restaurant we were shown straight to a special table for people in superior positions. And he said to the waitress, ‘Please bring this young lady food that will make her remember you well,’ and the waitress looked at me and probably thought ‘Well, a fine ‘lady’ she is!’ I looked half-dead, I had only just come out of the camp. But I didn’t care, and all I thought was, ‘Let her talk, let her not talk, just let them give me something.’

I would have happily eaten his lunch, too. When I felt that full feeling in my stomach I blushed with happiness. And he said, ‘And now we shall go to the militia.’ So we went. We went in, he picked up the phone and called this factory director and asked me if I could sew. Sewing was one thing I could do. So he said to this factory director that tomorrow he would be sending a girl, a young woman, and told him to give me a job and a room to live in.

And then I said, ‘That’s all very well, but where am I going to stay tonight? I haven’t got anywhere to sleep.’ He said, ‘Today you shall go with me to my house, my wife will give you bed linen and everything.’ He was a man of his word. He took me to his house and introduced me to his wife. And I could see that it was a decent household.

His wife gave me tea and made some sandwiches. When I had eaten she took me to the bathroom. They even had warm water, but I washed in cold water and fell asleep... I’m sure that if they hadn’t woken me up I would have slept there for a month.

The next day he and his wife went with me to the factory. I got a room as well. And that’s how it was, that’s how I found work and a place to live in Moscow. Only that was no way out for me. I didn’t want to stay in Moscow.

I wanted to go to Israel. I wrote to my sister Cyla, who lived in Israel, and asked her to send me an invitation. I took the invitation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I walked in and saw this real looker, a young Russian, sitting behind the desk. I told him, ‘It’s like this.’ He asked me why I wanted to leave the Soviet Union? I said, ‘I have no one here. I am alone. And there I have a sister.’

Then he said to me, ‘So you want to go to those Jews, those speculators?’ – I guess he didn’t realize that I was Jewish; I’ve always had light hair – and he went on, ‘That’s no nation. They’re speculators, swindlers, and you, you’re a young, pretty woman – what, you can’t find a husband here? You won’t be alone; you’ll have children yet. And where will you have it as good as here in our Soviet Union?’

I couldn’t tell him them that I had been in the camps. I couldn’t admit to that. They’d said to me that if I ever told anyone about that, they would come and take me away again. Anyway, it would probably only have made matters worse. In the end, he sent me away and told me to come back in two months. But I’d already realized that it was not going to work, that they wouldn’t let me out of the Soviet Union.

I worked in that factory sewing clothes for three years, and then I wrote my sister another letter. I asked her to help me get to Poland somehow. It turned out that a distant cousin of ours had a husband who was a Polish diplomat. He helped me to get to Poland. I came back in 1958.

Unfortunately there was no way of getting to Israel from Poland, either, because Khrushchev had said that Poland was not to become a stopping-off point, and that they weren’t to let people go who had returned from the Soviet Union. So I stayed in Warsaw.

In Warsaw I moved in with that diplomat and his wife – after all, they were family. As soon as I arrived I went to the editorial office of the ‘Jewish Word,’ which was called ‘Folksshtimme’ at the time. I walked into the editorial office, and there I saw a whole group of people I knew from Wilno.

As soon as they saw me, they said, ‘What a good job you’re here – tomorrow you can come to work.’ One of my friends from back in Wilno took me to the editor-in-chief and said ‘This girl knows Yiddish well.’ And that’s how I started work with the paper.

At first I was a typist – it was a huge editorial office; there must have been about 100 people working there: editors, proofreaders. Not like it is now. Then, 98 percent of the issue was in Yiddish and only 2 percent in Polish. And now it’s the other way round: 90 percent is Polish and 10 percent Yiddish.

Not long after I arrived in Warsaw I married for the second time. I must admit I was pretty and men liked me. My husband was Jewish. He was called Meir Berger. He was handsome and knew Yiddish ‘perfekt.’ He was from Volhynia; I can’t remember where from exactly.

When he was seven his father died and his mother was left alone with three children. They didn’t have anything to live on, so Meir went to learn to be a carpenter, to be able to keep the family. Meir didn’t have any higher education. He was self-taught, but he had more knowledge than many a university graduate. There was no subject he couldn’t talk about.

We met at the home of my distant cousin and her husband, where I was living. He was a friend of theirs. He was single and I was single and they very much liked him and talked well of him. Very soon, after just one week, we got married in a registry office. I didn’t want to be a lover and I was sick of living alone. He too wanted to have the security that I would be with him. And so we proposed to each other.

We didn’t have children; I didn’t want them. I had not yet recovered, and then to have a baby at once... no, no. All the more so that frankly we weren’t very well off.

Meir was a communist, an idealist. Before the war he had even been in prison for his communist activities. After the war he moved to Wroclaw and worked for the party. When the anti-Semitic purges in the party began, he applied to be moved to Warsaw. That was about 1955, 1956.

Before he left Wroclaw he was offered a move to officers' school and a high-up post in the UB [see Office for Public Security**]** **23** But at that Meir said, 'I'm not cut out for that kind of work.' And that was the end of his party career. When he came to Warsaw he still belonged to the Party but was just a rank-and-file member.

Then he remembered that as a young boy he had done a carpentry apprenticeship, and step-by-step with his friends he organized an artisan co-operative. Its members were carpenters, furriers, cobblers and others. Meir was a carpenter, then a cabinetmaker, and ultimately he was the head of the carpentry section. As I said, we weren't very well off; he earned very, very little, and I went out to work then, too [in 'Folksshtimme'].

Our house was always full of guests. On Fridays sometimes even 20 people would come round, and I would make chulent. And as I already told you, chulent was something I could do. In fact we often had guests round, and we went out a lot to other people's houses. Our house was full of people, all Jews. It didn't matter whether they were ministers, or held other important functions, all that was important was that we were united by the fact that we felt Jewish.

Meir remained a communist to the end. He wouldn't hear of our going to Israel. I even tried to apply for documents to go, but he didn't want to let me. And so we stayed.

In the 1960s there were still a lot of Jews in Poland. Our editorial office ['Folksshtimme'] was in the same building as the headquarters of the Jewish Social and Cultural Society 24. I remember how once I took part in a recital competition organized by the JSCS. I prepared a poem by Norwid, 'To a German poet.' I won the first prize. [Norwid, Cyprian Kamil (1821-1883): famous Polish poet, dramatist and painter]

I also read Russian and Jewish poetry many times at festivals and on other occasions at the JSCS. Once I was offered a position as an actress in the Jewish Theater, but I refused – I preferred to stay with the editorial office.

In 1968 my husband and I lived in Warsaw. He wasn't thrown out of the Party; he was just a normal rank-and-file member. But I do remember that Meir was very distressed by those events [see Gomulka Campaign] 25. He couldn't get over the fact that the communists had hounded out their own comrades, their own people... From then on he withdrew into himself more and more.

Then he fell ill and couldn't work any longer. He was awarded special benefit for having been imprisoned as a communist before the war [World War II]. I was working then to keep us. I would have preferred him never to have worked if it had meant that he could have lived longer. I would have worked a thousand times harder just to have him with me.

Meir was an exceptional man. Exceptional! Everyone envied me him. He wouldn't eat anything until I came home from work. He always had a meal ready for me. He read an awful lot, and was very knowledgeable. Everyone called him 'professor.'

Meir died in the 1970s from leukemia. That was after the Jewish doctors had been thrown out of the hospitals, all the best doctors, so who could have treated him? [Editor's note: Mrs. Berger probably means by this the consequences of the events of March 1968]. In hospital they only made him feel worse. The anti-Semitism in the hospital was terrible.

All the Jewish life came to an end after 1968. Now there are really no Jews in Poland, and those that are still here are assimilated. They don't know much about Judaism. They are married to Poles – they're more likely to go to church than to the synagogue. They're not Jews, to me they're just rotten people.

As for the changes since 1989 26, I'd rather not express my views. I have to say, looking at our own Jewish backyard – the community organization and so on – that I don't even want to have any contact with them.

A few years ago I went to Germany with some other Jewish combatants. I experienced great disappointment then. We went into a church, and they're all on their knees. And I thought, 'Bloody hell, back there, in your own backyard, you're all Jews, but here you're Christians – so exactly who are you, then?' And so that's why I don't like associating with them.

I have some very good friends, well-educated people, but they are Poles. I don't really have any Jewish friends. The exception is one lady, who's a Jewish historian. She comes from Wilno, too. We often talk.

And that's my life and all about it... I've told you everything now.

- **Glossary:**

1 Dos Yidishe Wort/Folksztyme: Bilingual Jewish magazine that has been published in Warsaw every other week since 1992. The articles deal with the activities of the Jewish community in Poland as well as with current affairs. In addition there are reprints of articles from the Jewish press abroad.

2 Hasidism (Hasidic): Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word.

The movement provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

3 Betar: Brith Trumpledor (Hebrew) meaning Trumpledor Society; right-wing Revisionist Jewish youth movement. It was founded in 1923 in Riga by Vladimir Jabotinsky, in memory of J. Trumpledor, one of the first fighters to be killed in Palestine, and the fortress Betar, which was heroically defended for many months during the Bar Kohba uprising.

Its aim was to propagate the program of the revisionists and prepare young people to fight and live in Palestine. It organized emigration through both legal and illegal channels. It was a paramilitary organization; its members wore uniforms. They supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. From 1936-39 the popularity of Betar diminished. During WWII many of its members formed guerrilla groups.

4 Hakhsharah: Training camps organized by the Zionists, in which Jewish youth in the Diaspora received intellectual and physical training, especially in agricultural work, in preparation for settling in Palestine.

5 Vilnius Ghetto: 95 percent of the estimated 265,000 Lithuanian Jews (254,000 people) were murdered during the Nazi occupation; no other communities were so comprehensively destroyed during WWII. Vilnius was occupied by the Germans on 26th June 1941 and two ghettos were built in the city afterwards, separated by Niemiecka Street, which lay outside both of them. On 6th September all Jews were taken to the ghettoes, at first randomly to either Ghetto 1 or Ghetto 2.

During September they were continuously slaughtered by Einsatzkommando units. Later craftsmen were moved to Ghetto 1 with their families and all others to Ghetto 2. During the 'Yom Kippur Action' on 1st October 3,000 Jews were killed. In three additional actions in October the entire Ghetto 2 was liquidated and later another 9,000 of the survivors were killed. In late 1941 the official population of the ghetto was 12,000 people and it rose to 20,000 by 1943 as a result of further transports.

In August 1943 over 7,000 people were sent to various labor camps in Lithuania and Estonia. The Vilnius ghetto was liquidated under the supervision of Bruno Kittel on 23rd and 24th September 1943. On Rossa Square a selection took place: those able to work were sent to labor camps in Latvia and Estonia and the rest to different death camps in Poland.

By 25th September 1943 only 2,000 Jews officially remained in Vilnius in small labor camps and more than 1,000 were hiding outside and were gradually hunted down. Those permitted to live continued to work at the Kailis and HKP factories until 2nd June 1944 when 1,800 of them were shot and less than 200 remained in hiding until the Red Army liberated Vilnius on 13th July 1944. (Source:http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/vilnius%20ghetto.html)

6 Hashomer Hatzair in Poland: From 1918 Hashomer Hatzair operated throughout Poland, with its headquarters in Warsaw. It emphasized the ideological and vocational training of future settlers in Palestine and personal development in groups. Its main aim was the creation of a socialist Jewish state in Palestine.

Initially it was under the influence of the Zionist Organization in Poland, of which it was an autonomous part. In the mid-1920s it broke away and joined the newly established World Scouting Union, Hashomer Hatzair. In 1931 it had 22,000 members in Poland organized in 262 'nests' (Heb. 'ken'). During the occupation it conducted clandestine operations in most ghettos.

One of its members was Mordechaj Anielewicz, who led the rising in the Warsaw ghetto. After the war it operated legally in Poland as a party, part of the He Halutz. It was disbanded by the communist authorities in 1949.

7 YIVO: Yidisher Visenshaftlikher Institut, an Institute for Jewish Research, initially the Yiddish Scientific Institute . The first secular Yiddish academic institute, founded in 1925 at a conference of Jewish scholars in Berlin. The institute's headquarters were in Wilno. Its primary aim were the studies of the Jewish population, with particular emphasis on the Jews of Central Europe. It had 4 sections: history, philology, economics and statistics, and psychology and education.

The institute's greatest achievements include the formalization of a literary form in the Yiddish language, the inventory of archival materials and historical relics of Jewish culture, and sociological studies of the Jewish youth. In the 1930s a training program was developed enabling students with an interest in Jewish matters to gain a specialist education not offered by Polish universities. Leading figures involved in the institute's work included Simon Dubnow, Jacob Shatzky and Noah Prylucki. After the outbreak of World War II the New York branch of YIVO assumed the central direction, and still operates to this day.

8 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich) (1859-1916): Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of Tevye the Dairyman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

9 Peretz, Isaac Leib (1852-1915): Author and poet writing in Yiddish, one of the fathers and central figures of modern Yiddish literature, researcher of Jewish folklore. Born in Zamosc, he had both a religious and a secular education (he took courses in bookkeeping and studied law in Warsaw). Initially he wrote in Polish and Hebrew. His debut [in Yiddish] is considered to be the poem Monish, (1888, Di yidishe Folksbibliotek). From 1890 he lived in Warsaw. Peretz was an advocate of Yiddishism, and attended a conference on the subject of the Yiddish language in Jewish culture held in Czernowitz (1908). His most widely read works are his novellas, which he wrote at first in the positivist style and later in the modernist vein. In his work he often used folk motifs from the culture of Eastern European Jews (Khasidish, 1908). His best known works include Hurban beit tzaddik (The Ruin of the Tzaddik's House, 1903), Di Goldene Keyt (The Golden Chain, 1906). During World War I he was involved in bringing help to the victims of war. He died of a heart attack.

10 An-ski, Szymon (pen name of Szlojme Zajnwel Rapaport) (1863-1920): Writer, ethnographer, socialist activist. Born in a village near Vitebsk. In his youth he was an advocate of haskalah, but later joined the radical movement Narodnaya Vola. Under threat of arrest he left Russia in 1892 but returned there in 1905. From 1911-14 he led an ethnographic expedition researching the folklore of the Jews of Podolye and Volhynia. During the war he organized committees bringing aid to Jewish victims of the conflict and pogroms. In 1918 he became involved in organizing cultural life in Vilnius, as a co-founder of the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists and the Jewish Ethnographic Society. Two years before his death he moved to Warsaw. He is the author of the Bund party's anthem, 'Di shvue' (Yid. oath). The participation of the Bund in the Revolution of 1905 influenced An-ski's decision to write in Yiddish. In his later work he used elements of Jewish legends collected during his ethnographic expedition and his experiences from WWI. His most famous work is The Dybbuk (which to this day remains one of the most popular Yiddish works for the stage). An-ski's

entire literary and scientific oeuvre was published in Warsaw in 1920-25 as a 15-volume edition.

11 Bund: The short name of the General Jewish Union of Working People in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, Bund means Union in Yiddish. The Bund was a social democratic organization representing Jewish craftsmen from the Western areas of the Russian Empire. It was founded in Vilnius in 1897. In 1906 it joined the autonomous fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Working Party and took up a Menshevist position. After the Revolution of 1917 the organization split: one part was anti-Soviet power, while the other remained in the Bolsheviks' Russian Communist Party. In 1921 the Bund dissolved itself in the USSR, but continued to exist in other countries.

12 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 the Wawel Cathedral of the Royal Castle in Cracow.

13 Anti-Jewish Legislation in Poland: After World War I nationalist groupings in Poland lobbied for the introduction of the numerus clausus (Lat. closed number - a limit on the number of people admitted to the practice of a given profession or to an institution - a university, government office or association) in relation to Jews and other ethnic minorities. The most radical groupings demanded the introduction of the numerus nullus principle, i.e. a total ban on admittance to universities and certain professions. The numerus nullus principle was violated by the Polish constitution. The battle for its introduction continued throughout the interwar period. In practice the numerus clausus was applied informally. In 1938 it was indirectly introduced at the Bar.

14 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.

15 Ponary: Forest near Vilnius that became the killing field for the majority of Jews from Vilnius. The victims were shot to death by the SS and the German police assisted by Lithuanian collaborators. In September-October 1941 alone over 12,000 Jews from Vilnius and the vicinity were killed there. In total 70,000 to 100,000 people, the majority of them Jews were killed in Ponary.

16 Kolkhoz: In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of

peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

17 NKVD: (Russ.: Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del), People's Committee of Internal Affairs, the supreme security authority in the USSR - the secret police. Founded by Lenin in 1917, it nevertheless played an insignificant role until 1934, when it took over the GPU (the State Political Administration), the political police.

The NKVD had its own police and military formations, and also possessed the powers to pass sentence on political matters, and as such in practice had total control over society.

Under Stalin's rule the NKVD was the key instrument used to terrorize the civilian population. The NKVD ran a network of labor camps for millions of prisoners, the Gulag.

The heads of the NKVD were as follows: Genrikh Yagoda (to 1936), Nikolai Yezhov (to 1938) and Lavrenti Beria.

During the war against Germany the political police, the KGB, was spun off from the NKVD. After the war it also operated on USSR-occupied territories, including in Poland, where it assisted the nascent communist authorities in suppressing opposition. In 1946 the NKVD was renamed the Ministry of the Interior.

18 Campaign against ‘cosmopolitans’: The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc.

Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953.

A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans.'

19 Kolyma: River in north-east Siberia; the Kolyma basin is best known for its Gulag camps and gold mining. Between 1922 and 1956 there were hundreds of camps along the banks of the river, where both criminals and political prisoners were transferred. They were mainly working in the gold mines, but there were other industrial plants built there too. Over 3 million people were taken to the Kolyma camps.

20 Solzhenitsyn, Alexander (1918-2008): Russian novelist and publicist. He spent eight years in prisons and labor camps, and three more years in enforced exile. After the publication of a collection of his short stories in 1963, he was denied further official publication of his work, and so he circulated them clandestinely, in samizdat publications, and published them abroad. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970 and was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974 after publishing his famous book, The Gulag Archipelago, in which he describes Soviet labor camps.

21 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971): Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee

22 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union: Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

23 Office for Public Security, UBP: Popularly known as the UB, officially established to protect the interests of national security, but in fact served as a body whose function was to stamp out all forms of resistance during the establishment and entrenchment of communist power in Poland.

The UB was founded in 1944. Branches of the UBP were set up immediately after the occupation by the Red Army of the Polish lands west of the Bug. The first UBP functionaries were communist activists trained by the NKVD, and former soldiers of the People's Army and members of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR). In many cases they were also collaborationists from the period of German occupation and criminals.

The senior officials were NKVD officers. The primary tasks of the UBP were to crush all underground organizations with a western orientation. In 1956 the Security Service was formed and many former officers of the UBP were transferred.

24 Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews (TSKZ): 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. It is primarily an organization of older people, who, however, have been involved with it for years.

25 Gomulka Campaign: A campaign to sack Jews employed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the army and the central administration. The trigger of this anti-Semitic campaign was the involvement of the Socialist Bloc countries on the Arab side in the Middle East conflict, in connection with which Moscow ordered purges in state institutions.

On 19th June 1967, at a trade union congress, the then First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party [PZPR], Wladyslaw Gomulka, accused the Jews of lack of loyalty to the state and of publicly demonstrating their enthusiasm for Israel's victory in the Six-Day-War. This marked the start of purges among journalists and people of other creative professions. Poland also severed diplomatic relations with Israel.

On 8th March 1968 there was a protest at Warsaw University. The Ministry of Internal Affairs responded by launching a press campaign and organizing mass demonstrations in factories and workplaces during which 'Zionists' and 'trouble-makers' were indicted and anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia slogans shouted.

Following the events of March, purges were also staged in all state institutions, from factories to universities, on criteria of nationality and race. 'Family liability' was also introduced (e.g. with respect to people whose spouses were Jewish). Jews were forced to emigrate. From 1968-1971 15,000-30,000 people left Poland. They were stripped of their citizenship and right of return.

26 Events of 1989: In 1989 the communist regime in Poland finally collapsed and the process of forming a multiparty, pluralistic, democratic political system and introducing a capitalist economy began. Communist policy and the deepening economic crisis since the early 1980s had caused increasing social discontent and weariness and the radicalization of moods among Solidarity activists (Solidarity: a trade union that developed into a political party and played a key role in overthrowing communism).

On 13th December 1981 the PZPR had introduced martial law (lifted on 22nd June 1983). Growing economic difficulties, social moods and the strength of the opposition persuaded the national authorities to begin gradually liberalizing the political system. Changes in the USSR also influenced the policy of the PZPR.

A series of strikes in April-May and August 1988, and demonstrations in many towns and cities forced the authorities to seek a compromise with the opposition.

After a few months of meetings and consultations the Round Table negotiations took place (6th Feb.-5th April 1989) with the participation of Solidarity activists (Lech Walesa) and the democratic opposition (Bronislaw Geremek, Jacek Kuron, Tadeusz Mazowiecki).

The resolutions it passed signaled the end of the PZPR's monopoly on power and cleared the way for the overthrow of the system. In parliamentary elections (4th June 1989) the PZPR and its subordinate political groups suffered defeat. In fall 1989 a program of fundamental economic, social and ownership transformations was drawn up and in January 1990 the PZPR dissolved.