Umow Henryk

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Legnica

Poland

Interviewer: Jakub Rajchman

Date of interview: July 2004

Henryk Umow is 86 years old, and he grew up in Lomza, where many Jewish families lived before the war. During our two meetings in his apartment in Legnica, Mr. Umow told me about Jewish life in Lomza and about his experiences of Polish-Jewish relations in Jedwabne 1, where he spent some time in the mid-1930s. Mr. Umow doesn't want to talk about the Holocaust period; he lost his mother and two sisters in the Lomza ghetto, and still finds it too painful to speak about. His story is interesting and full of insight into the difficult relations between Poles and Jews in Poland.

My name is Henryk Umow. Before the war my name was Chaim Umowa, but when the Russians entered Lomza in 1939 they registered me as Umow, because, they said, Umowa is feminine. [In both Russian and Polish, nouns ending with ‘a’ are usually feminine.] And then after the war I changed my first name to Henryk to make it more Polish. But my sister [Zlata] always called me Chaim, even after the war.

I was born in Kolno, a little town near Lomza, on 17th May 1917. In 1920, during the Polish-Bolshevik War [see Polish-Soviet War] 2, my family moved to Lomza. My father said that bullets where whizzing over our heads as we rode to Lomza in the cart. Which means I survived the Polish-Bolshevik War – everyone in the family says I was at the front!

My father’s name was Icchak Umowa. He already had two children from his first marriage: my brother Benzir was born in 1908, and my sister Zlata was born in 1910. Later, besides me, he had two more daughters with my mother – my younger sisters: Leja was born in 1920, and Esterka in 1922. My mother’s name was Dowa Umowa, nee Friedmann.

I don’t remember any of my grandparents, either on my mother’s side or my father’s. I don’t know where either family came from, or how they came to be in Kolno, where I was born. We never talked about it. I didn’t know anyone at all from either family, except for my mother’s brother, who was a shammash in the Jewish community in Jedwabne, and whom I lived with for a while. But I don’t even remember his name. Also, I know my brother and sister from Father’s first marriage had some family in Warsaw, but that was his late wife's family. There was an aunt too – Mother’s sister, I think – she married one of the owners of a carbonated-water plant. Wirenbaum was his name, but they emigrated to the US. I only remember that like us they lived in Lomza on Woziwodzka Street.

I remember Father well, even though he died before I was nine. He was tall – I came up to his shoulders, like Mother. I know he was a tailor by trade, but he didn’t work. He stayed home; I didn’t know exactly what he did – I was too little. He said he was a middleman, in horses or wood or

whatever – it was always a bit of extra income. I remember that Father never hit us. When I'd done something wrong he sat me down and gave me a talking-to. And when I started to cry he'd ask why I was crying, since he wasn't hitting me. But I would have rather be thrashed, and I'd tell him to do it. But he said that if he beat me, I'd just cry a while and then do something bad again. I had to sit and listen – he thought that was the best way to raise a child. I remember that, and I did the same with my own children.

Mother wasn't tall – about the same height as me. She was my older siblings' stepmother, but they respected her and called her Mother – she was like a real mother to them. Mother was a hosiery maker – she had a machine, and she made new stockings and repaired the runs in old ones. Sometimes she'd make new heels or toes for socks. Having them repaired was worth it to people – it was cheaper than buying new ones and they saved a few groszys that way. The best season for her was spring – that's when the most young ladies would come to have runs repaired. My mother was a very good cook. Actually my favorite dish has always been every single one; I've always said there's just one thing I won't eat for love nor money: what we don't have! And when Mother would ask if something she'd made tasted good, I always told her that if I'm still alive, that means it tasted good. I figure Mother was most likely born in 1895 or 1896. I used to have a picture of her from before she was married, but it got lost.

My brother Benzir was ten years older than me. We called him Bencak, and then later, after the war, he changed his name to Bronislaw. He was a shoemaker by trade – he made new uppers for shoes, and also patched holes when necessary. I don't remember much about him from before the war, because when Father died, he and Zlata went to Warsaw, to live with their late mother's family. I know he got married there in Warsaw, to the daughter of a master shoemaker that he worked for. His wife's name was Roza; her maiden name was Pomeranc. I only visited them once before the war, for a few days. Mother sent me to find work in Warsaw. I remember I went there by car – by truck – some driver took me. I was there about three days, but there was no work to be had, so I went back to Lomza.

My sister's name was Zlata – in Polish Zofia. Here in Legnica, after the war, after she died, when there are memorial prayers in the synagogue, I asked them to refer to her as Golda. Some people asked who in my family was named that. You see, Zlata means 'gold', and in Yiddish that's Golda. She was eight years older than me. She was a communist, a member of the SDKPiL [3] and then the KPP [4], and she got in trouble for that. I'll never forget how one time I took a job guarding an orchard, to earn a little money. There were two of us, and the other boy had the night shift, but he went to sleep in the shed, and that's when there was a break-in and something was stolen. Some guys from the secret police came to ask questions. And as soon as they heard my last name, they asked me how I was related to Zofia Umow. When I said she was my sister, they asked right away whether I fooled around with communism too. I managed to wiggle out of it somehow, but they kept an eye on me for a long time after that. All the time they thought I was collaborating with my sister. I remember she never got married. There was a man who hung around her and I think he even wanted to marry her, but she didn't have time, because she was put in jail every time she turned around. And that lasted up until the war.

My two other sisters, Leja and Esterka, were younger than me – Leja was two years younger, and Esterka four. I was always spanking Leja, because she was beating up little Esterka. Leja was such a practical joker. On 1st April – April Fool's Day – I remember she told a couple to meet each other

in two different places, the woman in one place, the guy in another, telling each of them that the other had asked to meet them there. Or she'd send a midwife somewhere where no one was having a baby. I used to have a picture of her with me in the park in Lomza, but it got lost.

In Lomza we lived on Woziwodzka Street at first, on the corner of Szkolna [Street], and then on Krotka [Street], which was later called Berek Joselewicz [Street]. On Joselewicz [Street] we had an attic apartment, a kitchen and two little rooms. I remember my youngest sister, Esterka, was still in the cradle. There were these skylights there, and once a pigeon got in through them, and Mother had Bencak catch it and made pigeon soup, and my brother and sister ate the meat off the bones.

I was a very sickly child. I remember that my parents kept goats specially for me, so that I could have goat's milk, because it's healthy. We were poor, but Mother made sure our food was kosher. She did all the cooking for the holidays herself, and on Sabbath there was cholent. I remember that once I was in one of the rooms eating a non-kosher sausage I'd bought for myself as soon as I'd earned a bit of money, and it smelled really good. Mother called to me from the kitchen, asking me to give her a piece of it; she didn't know it was pork. So I told her I was very hungry but that I'd go buy another one for her. Mother cared about keeping kosher and I didn't want to upset her. So I dashed to the shop and bought a kosher sausage. Something similar happened with Leja: she saw me eating ham once, and she kept looking at me – she wanted me to give her some. I told her I wouldn't give her any, but that she could take some herself. Because that way it would be her own decision to sin – I didn't want to encourage her to sin.

Not every street in Lomza had plumbing in those days; on our street they still sold water by the bucket. There were lots of Jews living in Lomza. Almost everyone in the building where we lived was Jewish. I remember there was one woman who made wigs – we called her 'Szejtel Macher', which means wig-maker. The assistant rabbi also lived there; I don't remember exactly who he was and what he did for a living, but that's what everyone called him. And the owner of the whole building lived on the second floor; he had a butcher shop. I met his son after the war – he had a butcher shop here in Legnica. He gave me meat for free many times. The only Pole in the building was the caretaker. And I remember that I'd play with all kinds of kids – Polish ones too – in the courtyard of the building. Once I heard how they kept saying 'fucking hell'; I didn't know what it meant and I repeated it over and over. I went home and asked Mother, and she said it was a dirty word. And I go back to the courtyard and keep on repeating it. I remember that – Mother must have come up with a very deft 'explanation' of what it meant. I didn't understand it until later.

Our family wasn't too religious. Father went to the synagogue on Fridays and Saturdays, but he didn't have payes. He took me with him on Saturdays. I had to go – Father wouldn't put up with any dissent. We had electric lighting and we used it on Saturdays as well – we didn't ask anyone to turn on the lights for us. Some people asked Poles to do that, I remember. During Pesach we definitely didn't have bread – Mother always made sure of that. Every crumb had to be cleaned out, just like you're supposed to. Some of the pots were made kosher: we poured in water and threw in a red-hot stone and scalded it that way. Other dishes were kept separate, used only during Pesach – plates, spoons and so on – after all, you're not going to make kosher a plate!

We had matzah too: we went to a bakery, where the women rolled out the dough, and one guy made the holes in it and then it went in the oven. But I'd always keep a couple of groszys in my pocket to buy rolls on the side – I wanted to see what a roll tastes like during Pesach. But I never

spent that money, because every time I left the house to buy that bread, I was so full that I didn't want to buy anything to eat. I don't recall any seder, because when Father was alive I was still too little, and later there was no one to lead it: Father had died, my brother had left, and I was too young. We just had a normal supper. And on normal days Mother also made sure our food was kosher. When she bought a chicken, she'd have me take it to the butcher so that the ritual was carried out. And when she bought meat, it had to be thoroughly soaked and salted.

The synagogue in Lomza was on the corner of Jalczynska and Senatorska [Streets]. There was also a prayer room a little further down on Senatorska [Street], and another not far from our apartment. I don't remember any others. You had to pay for your seat in the synagogue. I remember that Father had bought a place, to the right of the bimah, I think. It was a beautiful synagogue, with the signs of the zodiac painted on the ceiling, all twelve signs. That was the main decoration. I remember there was a balcony where the women stood. There was a mikveh too; I was there just once, with Father. That was one Friday, just before Sabbath. I had to go into the water three times – we said in Yiddish 'taygel machen' [to take a bath]. That's the only time I was there; normally we washed at home, using a basin.

We spoke Yiddish at home, and I could read Yiddish too. There was a series of books called Groschen Bibliothek [the Penny Library] – these little booklets, published in Yiddish. I read Spinoza, and The Spanish Inquisition, about Torquemada [Tomas de, first Inquisition-General (c1420-98), a Dominican monk whose name has become a byword for cruelty and severity] and how Jews were burned alive, and about the Dreyfus trial. [Dreyfus, Alfred (1859-1935): central figure in the Dreyfus case, which divided France for four years. An officer of Jewish decent in the French artillery, Dreyfus was accused and convicted of having betrayed military secrets. He was sentenced to life. He was finally proven innocent and pardoned in 1906.] They were just little booklets, but what stories! I remember I left tons of those little books behind when I left Lomza.

Father died in 1927. He was 57, and he had a lung disease. I was in the hospital at the time, because I was also very sickly. I remember that my brother came to get me, but the doctor didn't want to let me go, because it was the second time that year that I'd been hospitalized for rheumatism. The first time it was my groin, the second time it was my knees, and the doctor didn't want me to have to come back a third time. It was in April, just before Pesach, and it was cold and wet. And if I'd come down with the same thing for a third time, it would have become chronic. But Mother begged him to let me come home. She had to sign a declaration that I wouldn't go to the funeral, but I had to see him! And I saw Father laid out at home, and I began to sob. When they took his body away for the funeral, they left me with some neighbors who kept an eye on me to make sure I didn't go out anywhere, not even out in the courtyard.

When Father died, Bencak and Zlata went to Warsaw to live with their late mother's family. They knew Mother wouldn't be able to support them. Even with just the three of us children it was hard. Mother arranged for me to live in the Jewish orphanage. That was lucky, because it meant she could take care of my sisters, Leja and Esterka. The orphanage was on Senatorska Street, in a nice building of its own. That building is still standing. On the ground floor there was a room where they had prayers, and a dining room, kitchen and storage room. On the second floor there was a playroom and the office, and the sleeping quarters were on the third floor. I remember there was a Jewish school on the same street, and between the school and the orphanage was a hospital.

Life in the orphanage was nice. The house-father was nice. Everything was done Jewish-style, and in accordance with the religion. In the morning when we got up we had to wash, then off to the prayer room for morning prayers. Then afternoon prayers and evening prayers – we had to pray three times a day. We ate all our meals together in the dining room. And the cooks had some trouble with me, because I kept finding hairs in my soup. After I pointed it out a few times, it stopped happening – apparently they started wearing headscarves. On the big holidays we got together with the children from another orphanage and celebrated them together.

I went to the cheder, which was right next door. I was very inquisitive in school – I was always asking: 'why?' But in religion the dogma is what it is and you can't ask why. So the teacher was always sending me to stand in the corner – that was my turf. He said I was a big free-thinker, and that I could learn everything if I wanted to, but I didn't always want to. They even wanted to send me to a yeshivah for rabbinical studies, but I didn't want to go. But I often feel that orphanage did me a lot of good. I don't know how Mother arranged for me to live there, and if she hadn't, I would have turned into a street kid. Being a boy, it would have been easy to run wild, but in the orphanage there was discipline and order. And I saw my mother and sisters often – I went home for dinners, usually on Saturday, because during the week I didn't have time, what with the cheder, and after classes there was homework to do.

I had my bar mitzvah ceremony in the orphanage as well. I remember there were several of us 13-year-old boys and we all had our bar mitzvah ceremony together. And after that, when I didn't want to study anymore, I had to leave the orphanage and start working. While I was still in the orphanage they apprenticed me to a tailor. That was a first-class craftsman! But I didn't take to that line of work, and he got rid of me. Then they turned me over to another one. I learned fast there; after a month I was better than the other boy, who had been there a whole year. But instead of teaching me, the craftsman sent me shopping with his wife, to carry the bags, so I ran away from there. But I had to go back home – I was about 14 or 15 then.

When I returned home, Mother gave me 25 zlotys. That tided me over for a while, but I had to start working. First I went to work for a cap-maker – a craftsman who made caps, partly by hand and partly by machine. I helped him make caps for veterans of World War I and the Polish-Bolshevik War. But later he didn't have any more work for me, so I was unemployed again. Finally one of the orphanage board members – a shoemaker by trade – needed to hire a boy, and he hired me, and taught me the trade. I worked as a shoemaker up until the war. First for that craftsman, and then for another one, whose workshop was in a building that had a plum-jam factory in the basement. And that's why I don't like plum jam – I saw too much of it being made. Exactly what he did with those plums I don't know, because I didn't look inside, but I remember to this day all those plums lying on the street.

In 1935 I got very sick. It turned out to be pneumonia. I remember that Mother didn't allow them to use cupping glasses on me , and I don't know the reason, but the doctor said later that that saved my life. I was very weak and had to stay in bed. And this was in July, the time of year when everyone went swimming. I always went swimming in the Narwia [the river that flows through Lomza] at that time of year, but that year I couldn't. At one point I started coughing up blood. Mother was working in the other room, and I called her, and she sent for the doctor right away. When he came he said I was out of danger, that now I'd get better. And not long after that I was on my feet again. And I quietly got dressed one day and went to my aunt's house – the aunt who

married Wirenbaum. I was still very weak, but I wanted to go somewhere. So Mother went hunting for me, and when she found me she yelled at me, because I hadn't let her know where I was. That was a serious illness, but somehow I managed to pull through.

Not long after that I went to live with my uncle – my mother's brother, who was a shammash in the Jewish community in Jedwabne. There was a job waiting for me there. I worked and had meals at the master craftsman's place, and slept at my uncle's. I was in Jedwabne for a few months. I don't remember the town itself very well; I know there was a synagogue, but a much smaller one than in Lomza – more like a prayer room. I didn't have much contact with the Jewish community; I went back to Lomza for holidays, except once, when the boss and his family went out of town for Yom Kippur and he asked me to keep an eye on his apartment. I don't remember my uncle very well anymore either. I don't remember his first name; his surname was Friedmann. He had a short beard, trimmed to a point. He didn't have payes. His son studied at the yeshivah , and I remember that once he spent a few days with us in Lomza, and I saw how he shaved. He made lather from some special powder that burned the hair, then he spread it on and removed it with a little stick, because he wasn't allowed to use a razor.

The one thing about Jedwabne that has stayed in my memory is the anti-Semitism. When I was going back to my uncle's from work I had to go through the town square. And there were Polish kids sitting on the steps there. Once when I was passing, they threw a cap at me. It landed by my feet, so I kicked it and kept going. And the next thing I knew I was surrounded. I didn't stop to think, just punched one of them in the mouth and started running away. Then they started throwing rocks at me. So I picked one up and threw it at them, and ran to the other side of the street so their rocks wouldn't hit me. And then one of them saved me. I don't remember his name – I know his brother was a communist. He calmed the others down. Then they demanded that I hand over my knife – they thought I'd wounded one of them with a knife. I showed them my hand with a bleeding finger that I'd cut when I punched the guy in the mouth, and I told them that that was my knife. They calmed down then. But there was a lot of anti-Semitism in the town. [Editor's note: Following the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book 'Neighbors', which revealed that Poles had carried out a pogrom on the Jewish population in July 1942, Jedwabne was stigmatized and has become a sort of symbol of the cruel anti-Semitism of provincial Poland.]

When father had died and I'd come back home after four years in the orphanage, we lived on Dluga Street in Lomza. That was our last apartment – we lived there until the Nazis drove us out. It was on the ground floor, in an annex; we had a very small room and a kitchen. I remember that when we had a houseguest – for example my sister or brother from Warsaw – I'd sleep under the table so they could have my bed. After all, I wasn't about to share a bed with my mother or my sisters! It wasn't what you'd call luxurious.

I had a few friends in Lomza, and sometimes we'd get together for a drink, to celebrate something, for example new tailor-made clothes. I remember that two friends – also Jews – and I all had new clothes made at about the same time, and we wanted to celebrate. And since they lived on the outskirts and I lived in the center of town, we celebrated at my place. I remember that was the first time my sister Leja ever drank vodka – and she downed a whole glass at once! And she wasn't drunk; she just laughed at us. I was about 20 years old then, and she was about 18.

There were other ways of having fun too. There were two movie theaters in town, and we went to the movies. Most of them were in Polish, but there were Yiddish films too. I remember a movie called Ben Hur – that was in Yiddish. The first time I went to the movies my brother took me. That was just after my father's death, but before my brother went away. I was about nine years old then. My brother was working in Lomza then. I don't remember the title, but it was some kind of war film – some soldiers with pikes came on the screen, and I got scared and hid under the seat. And I told my brother we were lucky there was a pane of glass [between us and the soldiers]. I didn't know they couldn't see us from there. And he laughed and said it was called a screen. But it was my first trip to the movies! There was also a friend called Aaron Ladowicz – I'll never forget him until the day I die. His father was a shoemaker, and he worked with my brother. Right after a movie, he could always sing all the songs from it perfectly. What a memory he had!

There were also various Jewish youth organizations in Lomza. For example the 'shomers' – Hashomer Hatzair 5. They had their get-togethers in a separate building – it was open almost every day from 5pm. They had different lectures, Jewish ideas, but also dances and parties. I signed up as a member there, to stay off the streets. I remember that was where I ended my career as a caretaker. I was supposed to make sure everything was cleaned up and so on. And in the basement of the building, some fruit dealer had a warehouse, and there were apples in it. Everything was behind a grate, but we got ourselves a stick and put a nail in the end of it. And every day he lost two or three apples.

I met my fiancee at the 'shomers'. Her name was Judis Fuchs and she had beautiful eyes – blue ones. I still remember her eyes – to this day I've never seen any like them. She was younger than me – born in 1920 or 1921. Her father was a porter: he hung around the town square with all his ropes waiting until something needed hauling. My mother didn't like it, but I wanted to marry Judis. I promised her we'd get married, but only after I got out of the army, because a man who hadn't been in the army was nothing but a jerk-off.

I didn't take much interest in politics. I didn't belong to any party, just – I don't remember who talked me into it, but I joined Hahalutz 6. That was a leftist organization. But just before the war broke out I resigned from it, because they were getting ready to go to Israel [Palestine], and I didn't want to. I had a girlfriend here, and we were engaged, and anyway I couldn't leave my mother alone with just my sisters.

I remember that I liked to work out. In Lomza there was a Jewish athletics club called the Maccabees [see Maccabi World Union] 7 and there were training sessions there every day. They were run by a sports champion who had even been in the Olympics – I've forgotten his name. They weren't professional training sessions, just simple exercises. I was stopped pretty often by the Polish secret police then, because I would leave the house in the evening with a little package, and they thought my sister had come and that I was handing out some sort of illegal communist leaflets. Then I started taking a different route, in order to avoid them, but it was too far to go, so I thought: 'so let them check me.'

The Maccabi club in Lomza was quite good, especially in soccer. When there was a match with the Maccabees and the LKS – the Lomza Sports Club, in which only Poles played – the stadium was always full. Because the Jews were playing the Poles. And the Maccabees frequently won. I remember they had some good players – three brothers named Jelen. The youngest of them ran so

fast his feet barely touched the grass. Once during a half-time he heard that the Poles wanted to rough him up good to eliminate him from the game, and that the coach was going to take him out of the game just to protect him. So he ran out onto the field and rested there during the half-time, so that the coach wouldn't replace him. And his brother – I don't remember if it was the oldest or the middle one – once kicked the ball so hard that the goalkeeper slammed into the goal along with the ball. When a match was held on a Saturday, there were always Hassidim [see Hasidism] 8 standing at the [stadium] gates in their payes trying to stop Jews from going to the game, because it's not permitted on Saturday. But hardly anyone listened to them. I remember the stadium was on the road into Lomza from Piatnica, a village north of Lomza. It was a really beautiful stadium.

Everywhere we lived, both before and after my father's death, it was always the same: all Jews, except for a Polish caretaker. Most of the Jews were traders or craftsmen. I remember that one family had a windmill; that was on the way to Lomzyca. On Senatorska Street a Jew named Golabek had a mill, but an electric one, not a windmill. One Jew also had a sawmill; one had a brewery, another a textile factory. Then there was the Mirage Cinema – the owner of that was a Jew too. There were lots of Jewish shops. And on Sundays Jews sometimes did some stealthy business in their shops, by the back door, since they couldn't open officially. [Working on Sundays was prohibited by law to accommodate the Christian majority.] Even Jews told a joke about how one Jew asks another: 'How's business?' The other tells him that he loses money every day. So the first one is surprised – how come he hasn't gone bankrupt?! The shopkeeper explains that he has to close on Sundays, so he doesn't lose money then, and it all comes out even.

Relations between Poles and Jews varied. When there was some kind of holiday, for example Corpus Christi Day and there was a procession, Jewish kids were kept at home. [On Corpus Christi Day Catholic churches traditionally organize a street procession, during which prayers are said at four altars set up along the route.] And I think that was right, because they only would have gotten in the way. But there was a lot of anti-Semitism at times. There were two movie theaters in Lomza: the Mirage, which was Jewish, and the Reduta, which was owned by a Pole. But Jews went to both and made up the majority of the audience. Then the NDs [National Democrats, see Endeks] 9 set up a picket line around the Reduta and only let Poles in. And the place was full of empty seats. The cinema owner had to bribe them – 2 zlotys for philanthropic purposes – to get them to stop the picketing so that Jews could go in again.

Another time they stood in front of Jewish shops and didn't want to let Poles go in. Their motto was 'stick with your own kind'. It was a market day, and a lot of country people came after they'd sold their own wares, and they wanted to buy something: because they knew a Jew wouldn't cheat them, and that they'd get better goods cheaper, and even get things on *borg* [Yiddish for credit] sometimes. But the NDs didn't want to let them in. So the farmers went to their wagons and got their T-bars and drove the NDs off. It was the same when the NDs formed a picket not far from a company that a Jew owned, but where only Poles worked. They sorted old second-hand clothes there and packed them up for alterations. And all these workers came to that Jew and said they wanted a short break to straighten something out. So he let them go, and they went and beat up those NDs, and that was the end of it.

I had some adventures myself. Once I was walking down the street and a Jewish guy tells me not to go further, because some NDs are hanging about. But I kept going and they didn't recognize me as a Jew, because I didn't look at all Jewish, mostly because I was blond. Another time I was walking

with a Hasid dressed in Jewish clothes, and we saw some Polish country boys sitting a little way off. I told him not to say anything, and we kept going. They were saying to each other: 'Look! That Jew-boy is walking with one of us!' And they didn't touch us. I was thinking to myself: 'You fuckers, it's not one Jewboy, it's two!' Another time I was walking along the sidewalk by myself, and there were two guys on the other side. I heard them arguing about whether or not I was a Jew. And a moment later one of them ran up to me from behind and tried to kick me in the butt. I didn't see him, just felt that he was behind me, and I instinctively reached out and grabbed his leg. And he fell down – could have cracked his skull open. And then the other one said to him: 'I told you he's one of us!'

When Hitler had come to power and the war was near, people talked about it. The NDs were on his side. But then some of them came to their senses and said that Hitler had used the Jews to distract them, and armed himself and now he was going to kill them. But I thought to myself: 'You were on Hitler's side, so now you've got what's coming to you.' By 1939 anyone who had a radio was listening to it and talking about it. I spent time at Hahalutz – they had a radio, so I heard Hitler bellowing sometimes. Then in August I came up for army recruitment. I was glad, because after the army I was going to marry my fiancee. I went to the commission and they gave me a check-up. I weighed 48.2 kilos then, but I was healthy. The doctor listened to my chest and I was classified as Category A. [Category A is the highest, indicating full fitness for active military duty.] I remember there was a rich guy's son with me – he had a lung condition.

I chose the infantry, and I knew that in April of the next year I'd be on active duty. So I went back to work. But that was August [1939], and the newspapers were already saying that there might be a war. Then there was some sort of provocation – they wrote about that too. And one day – I think it was a Friday – I was at work as usual. We didn't have a radio there, but I went home for dinner and someone said the war had started. I had something to eat at home, and went back to work, and the boss said 'there's no work anymore – there's war'.

When the Germans were close to Lomza, I ran to the barracks and said I was a recruit. They told me the Germans were close and that I should escape, and that if need be they'd find me and induct me. So I escaped to Bialystok. Some very distant relatives of ours lived there – some kind of cousin of Mother's. I never knew them at all – that was the first and last time I ever saw them. I spent a few days there and moved on. I remember that the Germans chased me all the way to Suprasl [10 km northeast of Bialystok]. I went back to Lomza, where my mother and sisters had stayed. The Germans were in Lomza for ten days and then our 'allies' came [see Annexation of Eastern Poland] 10.

I nearly wound up in the Russian police force. I was asked to join, but I thought I didn't know Polish well enough, and besides, how could I boss around the old [Polish] authorities? So I escaped again, heading toward Bialystok. And then when the Germans came back, we all wound up in the Lomza ghetto. But I don't want to talk about that. I lost my mother and two sisters there, and it's too hard for me to talk about it. Too painful. I only know that when the ghetto was liquidated [The ghetto that was formed in July 1941 was liquidated in November 1942, and the surviving residents were transported to Zambrow (20 km south of Lomza) and from there to the camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau], I managed to escape and I hid in the home of a communist in the village of Zawady [3 km south of Lomza]. And that's where I hung out until the liberation.

The only ones who survived the Holocaust were my brother Benzir and my sister Zlata, from Father's first marriage. Zlata was in prison just outside Warsaw when the war broke out, and when the fighting drew near, the prison staff unlocked the criminals' cells so they could escape. But they broke down the doors of the political prisoners' cells and they all escaped together. My sister managed to walk all the way to Warsaw, which still hadn't been surrounded. Then – I don't know how – she and my brother both managed to escape to Lithuania. And they lived through the whole war there.

The rest of the family died. Mother and my two other sisters, Leja and Esterka, died in the ghetto. I don't know what happened to my uncle from Jedwabne – I reckon he was burned in that barn along with the others. The only others left were the ones who had emigrated to the USA before the war. That uncle – I don't remember his name – sent me a letter right after the war, asking me to describe the political and economic situation in Poland, and I was so stupid that instead of writing back to him, I turned the letter over to the authorities as attempted espionage. [Editor's note: In the early years of the communist regime in Poland, every attempt at contact with people abroad, especially in the US, was likely to be regarded as attempted espionage.] And just think – he might have arranged for me to come and live with him.

I stayed on in Zawady for a bit after the liberation, and then headed west, to the Recovered Territories [see Regained Lands] 11, because I no longer had any home or family. And that's how I got to Legnica. That was in 1946. I remember that there were a lot of Jews here. Later on, during the Sinai War 12, there was a joke going around about Nasser threatening that if Israel didn't stop fighting he'd bomb the world's three biggest Jewish towns: Legnica, Swidnica and Walbrzych. There was a Jewish committee, and I went there first, because where else was I supposed to go? That committee, it was like all the Jewish organizations – whoever was involved most closely with it got the most out of it. There were various gifts from abroad coming in – clothes, materials, money. They'd sort through it and keep the best stuff for themselves and give the worse stuff away to whomever they wanted. I never got anything. Once, I remember, they sent me to Wroclaw to pick up some kind of parcel. It was a great big package, with all kinds of things in it. And the train was so crowded I had to ride on the roof with that package, and every time we went under a viaduct I had to lie flat to keep my head from being knocked off. And I brought the package to the committee, and they didn't give me anything! But I didn't care. I had some clothes to wear, and enough money to feed myself.

At first, just after I arrived, I worked for the Russians, in a tank factory [some Soviet military industry were moved after the war to Poland]. That's what we called it, but really it was a repair service that had been at the front and then, after the war, remained in Legnica. I didn't want to work as a shoemaker anymore, because there was work only in the fall and spring. I pretended I was an electrician and they believed me. And I became an electrician due to that 'ailment' of mine – just one look and I get the hang of things. [Mr. Umow likes to joke about his inborn ability to learn.] My son and my uncle have that too. I became the staff electrician. At work I often talked with one Russian who had been at the front when Lomza was captured. He told me they had huge losses, and I asked him which side they'd taken the city from. When he told me it was from the north, I told him it would have been far easier from the south, the way Lomza was taken in World War I – that's what older people in Lomza had told me. He said it was too bad I hadn't been there with them, because I would have been a hero. Later on they wanted to put me on a pay-per-job

system, and I quit – as a staff electrician I was mostly waiting for something that needed doing, and how much would I earn for spending five minutes to change a fuse?! Then they came to my house a few time and wanted me to come back to work – they'd put me back on salary and even give me a raise. But I thought: 'The Russians are here today, but they'll be gone tomorrow, and I'll lose my job then anyway.'

I found another job almost immediately. A vacancy had just come up at a vinegar plant and I went to work there as an electrician. Then they merged the vinegar plant with a winery, and the chief engineer told me to go to the winery, because it was bigger. When I looked at those apples lying on the ground and pouring down the flue onto the production line, it reminded me of that plum-jam factory from before the war that made me stop liking jam. The same thing happened with apples. I worked there for a little while, then went to work for the police. I'd rather not say how that came about. I was in the secret police, in intelligence. I was trained in Wroclaw, and then worked in Legnica. I didn't wear a uniform – I could only put it on on a superior's orders. Later they wanted to transfer me to Wroclaw. I agreed on the condition that I be given an apartment. They gave me a transfer, but no apartment. I didn't earn enough to have two homes, so I commuted to Wroclaw. Fortunately one decent officer told me to submit a petition and that they'd transfer me back to Legnica. And I wound up working in the office in charge of identification cards, and that's where I ended my career.

For a long time I had almost no contact with the Jewish community. While I was working, I didn't have time to go to the community or to the TSKZ 13. Anyway it was a long way from my home. It was only after I retired that I started attending both. Because I didn't feel like cooking, and I could always have dinner at the Jewish community, and chat a bit. And at the TSKZ there were sometimes concerts or other events.

In the 1960s I thought about going to Israel. But my wife messed that up for me. There were these two Jewish merchants that I used to borrow money from frequently. I always paid them back, so they were happy to lend to me. And without saying anything to me, my wife turned them in for gambling. And she came to my office, saying I was going to get a reward. I bawled her out for butting into other people's business. I wanted to get it all straightened out, but it was too late, and they put them both in prison. As soon as they got out they emigrated to Israel. And – well, I was afraid to go there, because I was sure they thought that it was me who had turned them in, and if I ran into them there, who knows what might happen. So I stayed in Legnica. And I still owed one of them 200 zlotys. I still haven't paid him back.

I never personally experienced much anti-Semitism in Legnica. When someone tried making comments, I'd just shut his mouth for him. Only one time, when I was in Walbrzych visiting a woman and went to church with her, I heard a sermon where some bishop – I don't remember where he was from – said that when Jesus was asked if he was a Jew, he had said no; but a week later the church was celebrating Jesus's circumcision [Mr. Umow is referring to the celebration of Jesus being presented in the Temple on the eighth day after his birth.] And I didn't personally experience anything when those events in 1968 took place [see Gomulka Campaign] 14. Just one Pole asked me why I didn't leave the country. And he even proposed that we exchange ID papers, so that he could leave in my place. Another Pole told me that in the art school in Legnica, one of the teachers locked the Jewish students in a room and kept watch to make sure nothing happened to them. That was his duty as a human being. And I also heard about one Jew who left the country

then – he came back to Poland later and wanted to put flowers on Gomułka's grave, to thank him for kicking him out. Because he's doing very well now.

I didn't belong the PZPR 15. There was a time when everyone had to belong, but then they threw me out, and took away my membership card. I don't want to talk about how that came about. Later they told me to submit a petition and they'd take me back in, but I didn't want to. Once when I was sitting in the army canteen two Russian soldiers sat down with me, and I explained to them that I agree with communism but don't belong to the Party. Why? Because when the committee secretary or some other member steals things, and I have to call him 'comrade' – if he's a thief that makes me one too. I'd rather call him 'mister'. I remember that those two looked at each other, bought me a shot of vodka and left, saying I should forget they'd ever been there. I understood – I knew that just for hearing something like that they could end up in Siberia.

I met my wife here in Legnica, while I was working for the police. She was Polish. I found out her life story too late – I should have left her sooner, but as it was our daughter had already been born and I didn't want to abandon her. My wife had told me that a German had lived in her family's home, which was in a town near Tarnowo called Mosciki. I sometimes said to her: 'what, he couldn't live anywhere else?!' And later it turned out that she'd lived with that Nazi! I got a divorce in the end, but far later than I should have. Anyway I'd rather not rehash it.

My daughter Grazyna was born in 1951, and my son Bogdan two years later. Both of them grew up knowing they have Jewish ancestry. My son didn't and still doesn't have any contact with the Jewish community, but my daughter keeps in touch with it. She goes there for dinners, sometimes helps out when it's needed. Sometimes when there's a holiday she helps get everything ready. She never takes any money for it, and of course they have to pay the cooks and so on. My daughter lives on her own; she has three children, and two of her sons are away from home. She's on public assistance and has a hard time too. My son lives here with me. After he married and he and his wife moved in, they lived in the little room; now I've given them the big one and live in the little one myself.

My brother and sister, Benzir and Zlata, stayed on in Warsaw after the war. I used to go there on vacation pretty often; I even had a picture of us together not long after the war, at the unveiling of the monument to the ghetto heroes. But that picture's lost too. My brother had a daughter named Lila – a very pretty girl. She was born just before the war, in 1939. He sent her to Israel when she was a teenager, and then he and his wife emigrated to Australia. And right away he arranged for his daughter to come there too, because he didn't want her to serve in the army, and in Israel if a girl is 18 and single she goes to the army. [In fact marital status is not a criterion. Only girls from Orthodox Jewish families do not serve in the army.] It was at the beginning of May 1963 that they left the country. And my sister died that same month.

My sister worked for the Russians after the war – she was always hanging around those little Red sweethearts. She even wanted my daughter to come and live with her in Warsaw, but my wife wouldn't agree to it and I didn't insist. Now I regret that – maybe she'd be better off now. Back then in May 1963 when Zlata died – I remember I came [to Warsaw] on the 3rd to say good-bye to my brother. Zlata was already in the hospital then; I remember that she didn't want me to kiss her, because she had jaundice and was worried about my children. And that was my last conversation with her. On 16th May I was at home, and the doorbell rings. I open the door, and it's a telegram

[informing Mr Umow of his sister's death]. I remember it was 5:05pm. When I read it I started bawling like a child. I didn't have any family left. When my sister died, I got a letter from my brother, written in Yiddish. And my wife – a Pole – mislaid it somewhere and I couldn't even write back, because the address was lost. And I haven't heard anything [from him] since. My sister's medals were left to me – a bronze service cross and a Work Banner Second Class [order of merit awarded by the state], the documents as well as the medals themselves. When I worked for the police some guy told me that I could wear those medals on national holidays. I told him no – I could wear what I'd earned myself, but I wasn't going to parade around in my sister's medals for her accomplishments.

And so I live from day to day. Every day I'm prepared for it to be my last. I'm 86 years old already, working on 87. I can barely see anymore, not even my own writing. I've already got a plot waiting for me in the Jewish cemetery in Legnica; all that's left is to move in. But I don't mind, because the one thing I'm sure of is that I'll live until I die.

Glossary:

1 Jedwabne
town in north-eastern Poland. On 10th July 1941 900 Jews were burned alive there. Until recently the official historiography maintained that the Germans were the perpetrators of this act. In 2000, however, Tomasz Gross published a book called Neighbors, in which he indicted Poles as the perpetrators of the Jedwabne massacre. This book sparked off a discussion that embroiled academics, politicians and the media alike. The case was also investigated by the Institute for National Remembrance. This was the second such serious debate on Polish involvement in the extermination of the Jews. The Jedwabne debate attempted to establish the number of Jews murdered, to define the nature of the incident (pogrom or Holocaust), and to point out the direct perpetrators and initiators of the crime.

2 Polish-Soviet War (1919-21)

between Poland and Soviet Russia. It began with the Red Army marching on Belarus and Lithuania; in December 1918 it took Minsk, and on 5th January 1919 it drove divisions of the Lithuanian and Belarusian defense armies out of Vilnius. The Soviets' aim was to install revolutionary governments in these lands, while the Polish side had two territorial programs for them: incorporative (the annexation of Belarus and part of Ukraine to Poland) and federating (the creation of a system of nation states sympathetic to Poland). The war was waged on the territory of what is today Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Poland (west to the Vistula). Armed combat ceased on 18th October 1920 and the peace treaty was signed on 18th March 1921 in Riga. The outcome of the 1919-1920 war was the incorporation into Poland of Lithuania's Vilnius region, Belarus' Grodno region, and Western Ukraine.

3 Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL)
Workers' party founded in 1893, active in the Kingdom of Poland and in the Bialystok region. In 1895 it was shattered by arrests, and in 1899 rebuilt. It was a member of the 2nd Internationale (the radical wing). SDKPiL postulated the overthrow of the tsar and the introduction of a socialist

system through a socialist revolution by the working class (it considered the peasantry reactionary), and offered a brotherly alliance between free peoples as the solution to the question of nationhood (it perceived no need or way to reinstate a sovereign Polish state). During the 1905-07 revolution it initiated and organized strikes, rallies and demonstrations, and set up trade unions. During World War I it took up an anti-war stance, and in 1917 supported the revolution in Russia. The ideological leader of the SDKPiL was Rosa Luxemburg, and among the leading activists was Felix Dzierzynski. In December 1918 it fused with the left wing of the PPS (Polish Socialist Party) to form the KPRP (Communist Party of Poland).

4 Communist Party of Poland (KPP)

created in December 1918 in Warsaw, its aim was to create a global or pan-European federal socialist state, and it fought against the rebirth of the Polish state. Between 1921 and 1923 it propagated slogans advocating a two-stage revolution (the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the socialist revolution), the reinforcement of Poland's sovereignty, the right to self-determination of the ethnic minorities living within the II Republic of Poland, and worker and peasant government of the country. After 1924, as in the rest of the international communist movement, ultra-revolutionary tendencies developed. From 1929 the KPP held the stance that the conditions were right for the creation by revolution of a Polish Republic of Soviets with a system based on the Soviet model, and advocated 'social fascism' and 'peasant fascism'. In 1935 on the initiative of Stalin, the KPP wrought further changes in its program (recognizing the existence of the II Polish Republic and its political system). In 1919 the KPP numbered some 7,000-8,000 members, and in 1934 around 10,000 (37 percent peasants), with a majority of Jews, Belarus and Ukrainians. In 1937 Stalin took the decision to liquidate the KPP; the majority of its leaders were arrested and executed in the USSR, and in 1939 the party was finally liquidated on the charge that it had been taken over by provocateurs and spies.

5 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.

6 Hahalutz

Hebrew for pioneer, it stands for a Zionist organization that prepared young people for emigration to Palestine. It was founded at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia and began operating in Poland in 1905, later also spread to the USA and other countries. Between the two wars its aim was to unite all the Zionist youth organizations. Members of Hahalutz were sent on hakhshara, where they received vocational training. Emphasis was placed chiefly on volunteer work, the ability to live

and work in harsh conditions, and military training. The organization had its own agricultural farms in Poland. On completing hakhshara young people received British certificates entitling them to emigrate to Palestine. Around 26,000 young people left Poland under this scheme in 1925-26. In 1939 Hahalutz had some 100,000 members throughout Europe. In World War II it operated as a conspiratorial organization. It was very active in culture and education after the war. The Polish arm was disbanded in 1949.

7 Maccabi World Union

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

8 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.

9 Endeks

Name formed from the initials of a right-wing party active in Poland during the inter-war period (ND – ‘en-de’). Narodowa Demokracja [National Democracy] was founded by Roman Dmowski. Its members and supporters, known as ‘Endeks’, often held anti-Semitic views.

10 Annexation of Eastern Poland

According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact defining Soviet and German territorial spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland in September 1939. In early November the newly annexed lands were divided up between the Ukranian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics.

11 Regained Lands

term describing the eastern parts of Germany (Silesia, Pomerania, Eastern Prussia, etc.) annexed to Poland after World War II, following the Teheran and Yalta agreements between the allies. After 1945 Germans were expelled from the area, and Poles (as well as Jews to some extent) from the

former Polish lands annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939 were settled in their place. A Polonization campaign was also waged - place names were altered, Protestant cemeteries were destroyed, etc. The Society for the Development of the Western Lands (TRZZ), founded in 1957, organized propaganda campaigns justifying the right of the Polish state to the territories, popularizing the social, economic and cultural transformations, and advocating integration with the rest of the country.

12 Sinai War

In response to Egyptian restrictions on Israeli shipping using the Suez Canal, in 1951 the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling on Egypt to rescind its ban on Israeli ships using the waterway. Egypt ignored it, and in 1954 seized an Israeli freighter and in 1956 closed the canal to Israeli vessels. On 29th October 1956 Israeli forces attacked Egypt, which lost control over the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip within a few hours. The united stance of the USSR, the US and the UN forced Israel to withdraw from Sinai in 1957.

13 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.

14 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.

15 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.