

# Mieczyslaw Najman

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Swinoujscie

Poland

Interviewer: Tomasz Kluz

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*Despite his ninety years of age, Mr. Najman is a very vigorous man.*

*He tells the story of his life in a rapid manner, missing words, making frequent digressions...*

*You can hear in his voice the characteristic melodic drawl of pre-war Poland's eastern territories and the hard consonants of Yiddish.*

*He also frequently uses dialect expressions and phrases.*

*He speaks reluctantly and little about his childhood and family, more willingly about his youth in his home town of Drohobycz.*

*The subject he is most eager to discuss is his service in the Red Army and in the Polish army in the Soviet Union.*

*War in his story is the wandering of a young boy who experiences hunger, loneliness and deadly fear.*

*Mr. Najman proudly presents the medals and distinctions, both Polish and Soviet ones, he was awarded during WWII.*

*We speak in his apartment in downtown Swinoujscie, a summer resort on the Baltic Sea on the north-western tip of Poland.*

*Mr. Najman stresses repeatedly he is the last one in the area who observes Sabbath.*

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- **My family background**

I didn't know my grandfather. I remember my father. He was Herman Fischer [1866-1933]. His Hebrew [Jewish] name was Hersz. When they called him to the Torah for the bracha [properly: for the bimah, i.e. the platform where the Torah is read; bracha: blessing], it was 'Reb Hersz Jaakev



Cvi.' He wasn't particularly religious, didn't spend his days in the church [synagogue], wasn't interested in that.

He went to synagogue but to drag his children along... If they want to, very well, if they don't, no problem. Every morning he put on the teffilin, at breakfast put on the tallit. He used to say, 'You can do all this at home, without a church, you only have to observe what God told us to do. You have to observe God's commandments and do no wrong to anyone. In the family, one should help the other.

The family is sacred. Then you have to help others, but first your own home. [In short, Mr. Najman's father saw observing the commandments as more important than going to synagogue. Nor did he force his children to go to synagogue].

My father had his own house, with two large rooms occupied by his tailoring business. He sewed military uniforms, civilian suits, had more work than he could possibly handle. At the very center of Drohobycz [1](#) [city 80 km south-west of Lwow, today Drogobych in Ukraine], on Zupna Street.

Why Zupna? Because there was a 'zupa' there, a salt mine [first mentioned in 1340]. We lived downtown, in a beautiful house. A tin roof, everything of good quality. It had a second story and a total of eight or ten rooms. Everything very comfy. Beautiful windows, beautiful everything, straight from the carpenter. One room was rented out, some artists lived there.

The house stood on the main street, something like ten meters from it. In the back there was a huge garden, with trees, flowers, fruit, potatoes were planted in the fall. My father liked it when nothing at home was lacking. The kids were well dressed, everyone had what they needed, nothing was lacking.

My father was affluent, had his own house, didn't depend on anyone. Had apprentices, made good money, and so he spent. There was money for living, for the holidays we had ham. His sister sent us dollars from America.

My father didn't actually need it, we lived quite affluently. My father helped all his children. Those who were here, those who were there [in America], he helped them all.

My father had completed several grades of gymnasium. The opinion was he was an intelligent man. Your typical tailor or shoemaker completed five grades of elementary school and that was it. He read all day, always starting with the 'Gazeta Wieczorna' [daily published in Lwow 1931-1932], that was his main source of information. News from the whole day.

My mother says, 'You sit with the newspaper all day!' And he replies, 'You know, when I read a newspaper, it's like eating chocolate. You won't understand that. When I read 'Heine Werke,' [German: works of Heinrich Heine, 1797-1856, a famous German poet] I know what the man represents. You have to read both, it'll get into your head. If you read Heine Werke, you'll be able to reason. You must read; the mind has to be trained for those things.'

He never joined any political party. He generally tried to establish relationships with people and know everyone... He attended a meeting here, a meeting [there]... Participated everywhere, entered all organizations. The Jewish ones not so much, but the Polish ones very much so. He was always asked to sit on all kinds of acceptance boards, committees, had his say everywhere. He was

a master tailor, gave lessons, educated apprentices, was active in the tailors' guild.

He knew how to cut, knew how to sew and he won contracts. The 6th Podhale Riflemen Regiment [elite mountain infantry unit] was stationed in our town and all the officers came to my father to order a uniform. Because my father knew how to fit it well, and even the commandant himself came to us. And how did Janicki sew? [another tailor, name typically Polish].

He had an officer son. And the son had his uniforms made secretly by my father. Because his father didn't know how to sew, just a botcher he was. And so the officers came to have their uniforms made to measure. And every officer wanted to look as handsomely as possible, for the suit to be beautiful, for there to be no wrinkles under the armpits.

When he tried on the uniform, my father would ask him to stand on the table and he looked for any wrinkles. My father knew his trade. And then he said, 'My son will deliver it.' I was that son, and I always got a tip for delivering it, my kind of pocket money.

There was the fire brigade, there was the prison administration [for whose officers Mr. Najman's father made uniforms as well]. There was the famous Brygidki prison in Drohobycz [major facility for up to 1,500 convicts, named after the Brygidki prison in Lwow, located in a former convent of the St. Brigid Nuns, the name 'Brygidki' served as vernacular for 'prison' in the region].

The warden also had his suits made by my father. He came by droshky to bring the material himself, and then came himself for the measurements. He said, 'Take your son with you, let him see the Brygidki,' and there were prisoners in fetters there.

There were also those who made beautiful pieces of furniture. When the warden saw what a great job my father had done, he ordered for such a piece of furniture to be presented to my father.

In winter time we received potatoes and other things. There were also the 'Gutbesitzer' [Yiddish and German: estate holders], my father made suits for them too, so they supplied us with potatoes and other things, such as fruit. So that my father didn't have to buy anything, he only had to make the suit. My father was very popular in this respect, it must be said.

Until he fell ill. He was 66, started turning jobs down. He woke up in the night, felt bad. They bled him, that was the fashion those days, but it didn't help and he died. No one took over the business. He had sons who were tailors too but it wasn't the same. When my father died, his funeral was attended by several hundred people from the family alone, we were such a big family. And it all untangled itself.

My father had a first wife [Mr. Najman doesn't remember her name] with whom he had six children. She died upon delivering the sixth one. My father was already advanced in age [but] still he married again, she was nineteen years old. That wife [Mr. Najman's mother] took her mother with her [to live with them], and with this new wife he again had six children.

Three sons and three daughters from the first marriage, and three sons and three daughters from the second one. [From the first marriage] the girls were Besza, Róza, and Sala, and the boys were Dawid, Mendele, and Herszel.

And so the son [Herszel] was left. When he was in fourth grade gymnasium, there were no apprentices in my father's tailoring shop. My mother says, 'Hersz, take him for an apprentice. What use is there of going to school, what will they make out of him there, better you teach him to be a tailor.'

The brothers and sisters in America found out about that and were appalled. It's not fair, they said, to take a child away from school and turn it into a tailor's apprentice instead. And they brought him there and things got unpleasant. They brought him to America.

He studied in America and became a professor, he was so smart. Still, every month he sent my father money. He didn't care whether it was this line or that line. His name in the US was Harry Fisher.

Grandmother Golda was always very busy, had no time for anything, always working. She baked her own bread and took care of us all, and there were almost ten of us. She had her hands full from morning until night, and her daughter was a young girl, 19 years of age.

So many chores from the very start, her mother helped her with everything. As for praying, I remember those things, she was very religious, composed, took care of the house and nothing else interested her, it was her whole day, from dawn till dusk. At some point she fell ill, went to hospital and died. Before the war, in 1933. She was eighty-something. She was already of advanced age when she moved in with us, her husband was already dead.

My mother was called Sabina. Wajgert-Najman, something like that. She was born in 1892. They killed her in 1941. She had a brother, Moryc. A trader. Her elder. She was a pretty girl, only she wasn't prepared to marry so early. She moved in, there were a total of almost dozen children, six already at home, she delivered another six, it was really hard work.

You had to do their laundry, see them to school, keep the house clean. You had to help them with their homework. When she had time, she'd take a child... when she saw someone had problems at school, she'd say, 'Come, come to read and write with me.' And she'd say, 'You speak only Polish at home, I'll speak Polish to you so that your classmates don't laugh at you.'

She read a lot, that was her way of learning. Whatever she read, she called the kids, told them everything. So that the children knew what the story was, who wrote it. She told us about Adam Mickiewicz [2](#), about all those Polish poets, so that we knew our way around in school. Who was Mickiewicz, who was the poet Maria Konopnicka... [Maria Konopnicka (1842-1920): Polish author of poems and novels for children and adults]. She prepared us kids for school.

She made sure we were clean, explained to us how to behave at school, how to reply. 'If [some] child is hungry and you have two sandwiches, give him one. And remember, children, that one is replete and one is not. The latter is prepared to do anything, the good and the bad.'

So if you have something to eat, give it to the other child, because when you come home, there'll be something to eat and the other kid may have nothing to eat at home...' Some of the Ukrainian children were very poor. And that's why I was very friendly towards my classmates. Everyone was, there were no divisions in the classroom.

My mother was very religious. She prayed on Saturday, blessed the candles, I remember, as a boy, that she was very observant of those things. Kosher, all those things, she observed them. With that grandmother, her mother, they observed all the laws.

In the morning, when we were going to school - a dozen kids, fewer later - Grandmother always got up, gave each of us a piece of bread with butter, and sent us to school. The stepsister from America paid all the money she could towards education, one step-sister worked at a legal office, the other too, and my own sisters completed eight grades, a little bit more perhaps, and that was all their education.

My sister Tomka [probably a diminutive of Toma, Tamara or Taube], married name Friedman, had two children, they were also killed. She was born in 1902. Her husband was a barber, very talented, had his own shop in Drohobycz. He came from Przemyśl, a civilized, progressive man.

Tomka was a cultured person; she spent the summers not in Drohobycz but in Truskawiec [renowned health resort some 100 km south of Lwów and 10 km from Drohobycz, today Truskavets in Ukraine].

My second sister was Klara, born in 1908, had two grown-up kids, Edziu and Darek, she too was killed in 1942. Klara had a kind of embroidery shop, she embroidered shirts, all kinds of belts, doilies, worked there herself and had employees too.

[Her husband] worked at the Galicja, making some four hundred zlotys a month [Galicja: Jewish-owned oil refinery in Drohobycz]. He was a mechanic, a handyman, raised in an orphanage. They also went out of town for the summer, lacked nothing.

The third one, Klara Kleiner, killed during the Holocaust, was married to a restaurant waiter. She also had children, Szomek and Jonas, they were killed too. And a brother, Filip, sixteen years old [born 1925], also killed in 1941. Of them all only I survived and my brother Michał, born in Drohobycz in 1913. Survived the war, got married in Poznań and died there, it's twelve years now since he died [in 1993]. His children are still alive.

### • Growing up

I was born on Judgment Day, Yom Kippur, 30th September 1916, in Drohobycz [Editor's note: in 1916, Yom Kippur fell on 7th October]. Then the circumcision, there was a whole story. Those were always wealthy people who did that. Affluent people, respected in the community, they took care of that, gave you presents. So it was a big story, in this respect.

I didn't go to cheder, a melamed came instead and taught us Ivrit [Hebrew] at home. I was around 12. He came to us and taught me and my brother. No one wanted to study but the melamed still taught us and he got the few zlotys. My father paid him. 'Damn, you want to be ignoramus?' he said.

The bar mitzvah was very solemn. They kept an eye on me, I was to read from the Torah, there was a blessing, various ceremonies, the rabbi was there, the room full of Jews, yes, it was solemn, you must admit that.

At home we spoke Yiddish. After the kids went to school, we started speaking Polish, all the time, to get used to it, to make the transition to gymnasium possibly smooth. There was school, so we studied, it was seven grades or something like that. You had to study.

The headmaster of the school where I went was called Szymon Bartkowiak or Bartnik, I don't remember. If I did something bad, he'd box my ears: 'You must study because you're talented, you should go to university!' And he encouraged me. He was tall, fat, my father made suits for him. He tried to make sure I studied.

He'd ask my teacher if anything was wrong, what my problem areas were. He'd call me, explain to me for half an hour, demonstrate. 'You should be the top of the class,' he'd say.

At my elementary school there were fifteen Jews, five Catholics and ten Ukrainians. There were very few Catholics around. Drohobycz, Lwow, it was Zapadnaya Ukraina [Russian: Western Ukraine, pre-war Poland's south-eastern territories, lost to the Soviet Union in 1939], it was Ukrainian territory, an ethnic melting pot.

Ethnic Poland was elsewhere. The towns south and east of Lwow: Drohobycz, Boryslaw, Stryj, Sambor, it was all Ukrainians, very few Poles. [Editor's note: pre-1939, Poles represented, respectively, 40 percent of the population of Drohobycz, 58 percent of Boryslaw, 34 percent of Stryj and 41 percent of Sambor.]

The Pole was the 'Gutbesitzer.' That was your typical Pole, the ordinary ones were few, rather those with large estates. The land, the forests, that was something the Poles owned a lot.

We played football with a rag ball. We came to the park, and so did the Ukrainian, and the Pole, and the Jew, whoever wanted to play could play with us. There was no resentment [ethnic strife], you can't say that. At least our father taught us to never look for divisions but instead to always look for ways to peaceful coexistence.

You shouldn't say that this guy is this and the other one is like that. He said, 'If someone cheats you, don't tell anyone or you'll be laughed at. Don't speak falsely of anyone, don't be a false witness. You'll be liked by others and they'll respect you.'

Business college was like gymnasium. [Editor's note: business college was a vocational school, whereas gymnasium offered a general curriculum.] They taught a profiled course. There was German, there were other subjects, like in gymnasium, but above all there was math. It's a business school. Its purpose was to teach you to calculate.

To compose your sentences was important too, but the emphasis was on math. They taught Polish history. The teachers were all Jews. The finals included an essay, like usual, there was a commission, I remember. Several oral examinations. But the most important thing was to know your math. I knew how to calculate, I had a knack for this, that was the basis.

There were those organizations, Hashomer Hatzair [3](#), Betar [4](#), I was a member and we had a leader. Several hundred members, a lot. They were supposed to leave [to Palestine] but they didn't. I was... I wasn't so deeply involved because I had a job, but those who didn't were active on those organizations from dawn to dusk.



They came and asked, 'Please, come and join us.' What they did? Only discussions about how it is in Israel [then Palestine], that we should go there because we have no future here etc. All kinds of lectures about Israel, about how life there looks like. We participated in the Israeli elections, everyone came and we voted. Signed for this or that candidate. The Jewish organizations were many.

For the summer holidays we went to Truskawiec, I had a sister there, because my brother-in-law [Friedman] opened a shop there for the summer season. I spent three months there. Those were beautiful holidays, a beautiful area, all kinds of parties, dancing. Everyone came there, from all over the world. I spent the whole summer there.

I got food to eat and I went to watch. I met new friends... My brother-in-law took me, 'Come with me, we'll go to that one, it's this business here, and here they do this, and here they make that... I'll introduce you to everyone, you'll be able to visit on your own.' There were beautiful cafés there, beautiful restaurants. Visitors came from America, from various places of the world, and people made big money there.

My brother-in-law had seven helpers at his barber's shop. His wife worked in the kitchen and had someone to help her so that when the barbers came back from work, they'd find the dinner waiting. I lived with my sister in a house, you had to pay for it, pay all the bills, and the business paid for all that during the three months and in winter you didn't have to do anything.

The shop was all glazed in. When a customer came, they seated him, there were the helpers, smartly dressed, beautiful aprons, their hair elegantly made, the instruments, everything top quality, as you call it. He sat there, they cut his hair, he saw himself [in mirrors], and they were all very kind, not like today.

A customer came, the barber said, 'Good day, sir! How can I help you? Right on, sir!' He put on the white apron. 'Like this? That'll be very good. Or like this, that's the current fashion. Here you go...'

Everyone wanted to be served quickly, no one spent an hour there, he came and minutes later he was shaved, his hair cut, and he left satisfied. On top of the five zloty charge they gave a two zloty tip to the apprentice. Because the people who came there were rich, not like us, but rich, they came to spend. When a man like that partied, went to a café or a restaurant, everyone benefited from that.

Drohobycz was a very interesting town, because it was industrial, there were mines there, one mine, another mine [salt and coal mines], there was the Polmin, where very many of the employees were Polish [Polmin: pre-war Polish state-owned oil company, operated a refinery in Drohobycz, Europe's largest at the time].

And then, a short distance from Drohobycz, two or three kilometers, there was Boryslaw [town 5 km west of Drohobycz, known for its oil fields, today Borislav in Ukraine], so there were jobs there too.

There were many business owners, and their managers, and the agents... everyone had a job. So either you repaired the boardwalks [Boryslaw had plank boardwalks, often repaired], or found a job at the sawmill, or unscrewed the pipe somewhere and stole some of the oil... There was no tragic poverty, it was quite okay; you could earn the few zlotys.

There were two cinemas [in Drohobycz]. One was a Jewish one, yes. The manager and owner in one was around 60, and the girl [his wife] was in her twenties. Everyone went to the movies, my father and us included, if he found himself near the cinema, whether he had already bought a ticket or not, we went inside. All the big movies we went to see. Polish ones, foreign ones too, like today, the same kind of movies.

There were theaters, various troupes, beautiful guest performances. And there was this, I don't remember his name, who slept in our apartment [an actor who rented a room in the house where Mr. Najman lived]. We saw the 'Dybuk' [a play by Szymon Anski (1863-1920)], it was macabre [eerie]. Ida Kaminska [5](#), we saw her performances, after the war too, we also saw the 'Dybuk,' but that was after we had found ourselves in Walbrzych.

Ida Kaminska, when she entered, everyone rose from their seats, such was the respect for her, the most famous actress in the world [Poland's most famous Jewish actress, known in the world]. She went to America and there she died [in 1980]. There were some exceptional artists, usually from Russia, incredible theaters. If a theater came, the room was always packed. A new group every month. Russian, Polish, Jewish...

I remember the Zaniewski circus, other circus troupes, the horses, everything. The Bleibert brothers, the artistes, they hammered nails into their knees. They would lie down on broken glass and you would trample on them. They later fled abroad, [running away] from the Germans. There were very many performers.

There were those who walked the tightrope, high above your head, without any protection. It was like from this house to the other side of the street, twenty meters. There and back. All kinds of performers came because there was money [in town] so there was demand.

There was everything, a sports club, I also played, because I liked to play. There was the municipal [soccer] league, then the province level, teams came from Lwow, from Stryj, Sambor. Always a crowd of viewers to cheer the players up. The Jews had the Betar club [affiliated with the Drohobycz branch of Betar].

I went there as a child. There was the Ukrainian club [Dniepro], one of the players on their team was Kicyla, a huge hunky guy. I remember that when once he shot at the goal and the ball hit the goalkeeper in the head, the poor guy fell down and didn't get up anymore.

I supported Betar. Then there was the Junak club, a very strong team, only Poles. I remember Betar playing against Junak. Betar was a strong team, but once the Ha Kohwi team came from Vienna and wasted them [probably Hakoah, a famous Viennese soccer team, founded 1909, the first all-Jewish team ever, often played 'guest matches']. Ha Kohwi [Hakoah] crushed Betar eleven to two, and I cried, I remember.

Like a child. They played so beautifully, scoring goals with header shots, beautiful boys, it was a pleasure to watch. [Editor's note: headers were rare before the war because the balls used at the time were much heavier than those used today, which is why Mr. Najman remembered that].

A huge crowd, you couldn't get through. Within a kilometer radius around the field people stood on roofs, on ladders, because the tickets had long been sold out, and the game was incredible. We shouted 'Down with the referee!'



My neighbors were mostly Jews. I had one Polish neighbor, and apart from him there were only Jews around. When I went to elementary school, there were twenty Jews in my class and four Poles. The neighborhood, only the poshest Jewish houses, the most elegant businesses, run by Jews.

If a Pole had a store, the Jew competed with him so fiercely the Pole had to move elsewhere. You know? He had money, cut his prices, and the [rival] was unable to undercut him.

And those making money on the side, the droshky drivers, the ragamuffins... There were many of those among the Jews, the droshky drivers, the porters, because there was no work before the war, the government didn't hire [Jews for official posts]. That's why they went into commerce, because it was independent.

They looked for work because you had to earn your living. There was a market, on Tuesday and Monday, and the Jews sold wheat. The Jew bought from the farmer, took the stuff to the market and sold it at a profit. That's how they did it those days.

If someone was in trouble, people collected money for him, brought it to his home, so that no one died, God forbid. One Jew helped the other. For instance, a woman had several children and her husband died. What did they do? The people from the community came, put up some money, bought a cow, she grazed the cow, sold the milk and already had some money to live on.

There was one synagogue in Drohobycz, the rest were prayer houses [synagogue built 1842-1865, allegedly the region's largest]. The prayer houses were poor, you sat in a small room full of poor people, all in their payes, in their beards, lousy, all kinds of folk went to the prayer house.

If someone was rich, he didn't go. The rich offered gifts, and actually came in person perhaps once a year for a high holiday. I also went but I wasn't much interested, didn't have much enthusiasm for those things.

I remember the Kotower rebe [Editor's note: probably Kotlower rebe, from the town of Kotlow, 130 km east of Drohobycz] was in our town. He was riding to the mikveh in a carriage and the Jews with payes who stood by the road tried each to pluck some part from his carriage, because he was a 'holy man.'

Then was the Boryslawer rebe [from Boryslaw, 5 km from Drohobycz], and there was subsequently some strife between them as people started going to the other one. Because, those days, the rabbi was someone to settle disputes. A council met and you could come and lay out what your problem is. And your opponent [could do the same]. And some consensus would be worked out.

I remember the tzaddik's visit, it was the Belzer rebe [probably Yissachar Dov Rokeach (1894-1926), the third rabbi of the Belz Hasidic dynasty, or Aharon Rokeach (1877-1957), the fourth rabbi of Belz]. People clung to the train car, everyone wanted to get to him. He gave advice, read [told] the future. And how to get to him, you had to wait several days to see him. Jews came, Poles, everyone.

I remember, the police chief came, my father was making a suit for him, and says, 'You know what? I gave him 10 zlotys and he told me all cases I was currently working on would be soon behind me and I would get a big promotion.' And my father, he was a civilized man, says, 'Chief Sacilo, sir, and you believe in such mumbo-jumbo?'

The guy took offence and left. And my mother says, 'My God, he came here to tell you a story, you have to hear him out, you can have your own opinion but why cut him like that?'

[On Sabbath] you didn't do anything, you ate, drank, read and talked about Sabbath. What it was, that God created it, that it was His day. On Friday night, my mother had those candelabra, she'd lit all the candles. She'd put on her sheitl and pray for the week to be good, for us to lack nothing, for everyone to be healthy, for everything to go according to God's commandments.

For everything at home to be as it should, something like that, yes. The candles had already been prepared for Sabbath, and my father took the kids to the synagogue or they prayed at home.

I spent the Sabbath with my parents at home. I went to the prayer house and then home. My dad would read to me, tell stories. The children came, my brothers, some relatives, you sat at home, talked, read books.

All the holidays were observed. Preparations were made, my mother baked all kinds of things. On Rosh Hashanah, Judgment Day [Yom Kippur], you drank some tea in the evening and then you had to fast all day, until dusk. For Sukkot we made a sukkah, the booth, in the courtyard, because we had a good courtyard, and we ate meals there...

You organized a party, the neighbors came, friends, the Catholics came too. It was very nice, you spent time together, no one disturbed us. After all, there was no access from the house [meaning: street; the booth stood in the garden, in the back, hidden from view]. So you could play, read, sing.

Purim, yes, the same, you waved the dreidels at the Haman [Editor's note: the rattle you wave for Purim is called a greger; the dreidel is what you play with on Chanukkah] and told about it at home. My father told me who Haman was, why he wanted to exterminate the Jews, told me about Esther...

The announcement had already been given that all were to be killed but the king took a liking to that girl Esther and asked her, 'What do you wish?' And she wished nothing, no precious gifts, no gold or anything. 'I only wish one thing, Haman.' And what did she want? For Haman to be punished for his plan to kill all [Jews].

He had already prepared a gibbet, and he was eventually hanged himself. There were gifts... Depending on who could afford what. Yes, my mother observed all those traditions, she had a talent for that.

For Passover, I mean Pesach, all the dishes were cleaned, koshered and put in a special box in the attic, and you used a different set for the seven days. It was Passover, all the dishes had to be new. Then the walls were whitewashed. We ordered matzah and it was sent to us elegantly, in a droshky.

When Passover came, father convened the children at the table and told the story about how we used to be slaves, how God led us out of Egyptian slavery which is why we observe this holiday. And he asked questions. But we didn't care for those things [learning about the Jewish religion], we had Polish friends all around.

I worked as an office assistant at Kamerman's sawmill, the first couple of months my salary was just 20 zlotys a month, only after a couple of months that was raised to a hundred zlotys. My

brother also worked at the sawmill, there was no [other] job [6](#).

There were several dozen people waiting to take my place. I had the few zlotys, could go pick the girls and to a café, because those days there were cafes. The 6th Podhale Riflemen Regiment stationed in our town, all of them usually went to a café.

The café was like this, I was sitting at a table, I got up, asked a girl to dance. If I offered her a drink, I also had to order sandwiches, that was 3.20 [zlotys], and then I could agree with her whether she would go with me or not. Sometimes you had to give her a pair of stockings or a few zlotys, it wasn't just like that. Sometimes some troublemakers came, the police would have to intervene, but we had our own circle.

My friends were Jews, Poles - most of them officers, that's it. Most of them, because they were the elite, those were people who had shares in mines, very rich people, the cream of society. Elegant boys, pretty as a picture, yes. When a guy like that entered, the whole place smelled beautifully, he knew how to behave intelligently.

Those days, officers were usually sons of the gentry, not from the humble families. Very few of them were Jewish, there was one in our town called Langier, he was in charge of delivering the service mail and other things, an officer, gave a lot of money during the war for airplanes and so on [Editor's note: Mr. Najman probably means the collections of money carried out before the war with the purpose of buying equipment for the armed forces].

I had a girlfriend, I mean I dated someone, but war separated us. Mania Kurzewska, her name was; this was in Truskawiec. A pretty girl. I met her by chance, and we met several times. She held me by the hand, we had dinner together, went to dance, and that was the whole procedure. And I dated Polish girls. I met their families, those were large families, the mother had sisters, cousins, the cousins had sons, so there was always someone to talk to.

In 1938, 1939, my brother Filip was studying in gymnasium, conflicts had already started, this 'he's a Jew so a let him sit there' issue began before 1939. [The interviewee is referring to the so-called bench ghetto [7](#).]

As long as Pilsudski [8](#) lived, he somehow kept the lid on that, he had a Jewish wife, Sara [Editor's note: both of Pilsudski's wives were ethnic Poles: Maria Juszkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Szczerbinska]. After he died in 1935, things got different. My brother came from school and spoke about what went on there. They are doing nasty things, he said, that hadn't been before. But the teachers were ruthless, kept order.

### • During the war

When Hitler came to power [9](#), he wiped out all opposition. Hindenburg gave up power; he was weak and had nothing to say, and Hitler started filling all the top posts with his people. People said things would soon get nasty. Hitler had all the power and, above all, that he was oriented solely against Jews. 'Mein Kampf' - it said all Jews needed to be destroyed.

Why? Because Jews in Germany had a strong position, owned the industry. And the Germans envied that. And Jews had given them money to prevent communism. But the poor are always the

most numerous and that was how he appealed to the nation.

In 1939 [10](#) the Germans came, stayed for a week and left, and the Russians came [11](#). Nothing really happened under the Germans, only rumors circulated that people were being murdered in Przemyśl [city 250 km north- west of Drohobycz]. Very many Jews arrived from Przemyśl, it could have been the 14th, 15th September [1939], I don't even know where they went [12](#).

When the Russians came, they had nothing against anyone, gave everyone a job. Put their people in the offices, took in all the Poles workers, usually Jews [Polish citizens of Jewish origin]. Were friendly towards Jews. The officers came, married Jewish girls, life was normal. The Jews were happy, you have to admit that [13](#). They had jobs, were happy, people had jobs in the police, the NKVD [14](#), in all the offices.

The Poles stood aside, because they were opposed. Then the Soviets started purges, started sending the legionnaires [here: Pilsudski's supporters], officers, no officers, to Siberia [15](#), while the local folk was left in peace. Everything was under control, food ration coupons were introduced and that's it.

We lived in our house, no one bothered us. In one way it was like we had some property, in another it was like we didn't. The Soviets didn't like the fact that my father worked for the [Polish] army before the war, and this and that, but my father was no longer there [he died before the war]. So they could not harass him.

The house - what, were they supposed to evict us? My brother went to work, I kept working at the sawmill. And they [the Soviets] nationalized some of the sawmills. This is a revolution, it's normal, you take what you like. It's war, you know.

Our last name was Fischer. When the Russians came, we told them we were not 'gahayrat' [Yiddish: legitimate], meaning our mother and father weren't officially married. [Editor's note: the point probably being to hide the German-sounding name or the fact of having relatives in America, highly inconvenient under the Soviets].

The Soviet official says, 'So, after your mother, you're now called Najman.' In the military, I went by the name Najman, and my brother did too. My name was Samuel. But my documents said something about Mieczysław, something was there, Mietek, Michał, Mikhail... Because I have two names. At a Polish office, I always said 'Mieczysław' and so it went. And Samuel was a name I didn't use, to use the name Samuel at work?! You had to hide your [ethnic] origin.

When the Germans invaded [16](#), I had to go to war, to the military. They came, gave me the [conscription] order. Came home, a truck waited, took us all to Boryslaw. Me separately, my brother separately. My mother - it was a horror for her, crying and grinding her teeth she's going to be left alone. The younger brother [Filip] stayed. She cooked eight chickens, I remember, for the way. I put it all into a rucksack, it was very hot, the stuff got smelly, I had to throw it away.

The next day was already like war. The Germans had already entered Boryslaw. When they started pounding [shelling], everyone ran away. They were giving such a banging, such a cannonade, bombs, everything. There were many nationalities there, Ukrainians, Poles... Everyone ran away, only the Jews stayed. We were co-opted to some other group. They packed us and sent us to Russia, to Kharkov [city 900 km east of Drohobycz, today in Ukraine]. And there they started

training us. A month.

After a month they took our guns away and sent us to labor [17](#), to Siberia, took us there on trucks. And so I found myself in Omsk [city in Siberia, some 2,200 km east of Moscow]. Not in the army, but you had to work, carry off freight cars, load them with sand...

We were a separate unit, under escort. No one knew what they'd do with us. It was supposed to be the army, and it was something else. I don't know what it was. I was in the same army with my brother and one didn't know anything about the other.

And there was this young man, the 'prorab' [Russian: abbreviation of 'pravodnik rabot,' work leader], an engineer. Had us divided into tens, thirty or forty men, from Poland, Romania, Hungary, Kishinev [Moldova]... And we were prepared for work. What was the work? There was the 'vyertsushka,' an open freight car, it was called 'vyertsushka.'

They put us in it at eight in the morning, some thirty people, as many as would fit in, and took us to a place twelve or fifteen kilometers away where our job was to load the 'vyertsushka' with sand. People were hungry, one had hernia, no one paid attention. 'Davay, davay!' [Faster, faster!]. There was a musician with us, a professional, he says, 'Sir, I'm a world-famous professional, my name is so and so' - also a Jew by origin - but our 'prorab' says only, 'We have thousands like him.'

There were barracks, shacks, with plank beds, one row and another. Neither a pillow nor anything to cover yourself. And we slept on those. We received 'obyed, pokushat' [lunch, to eat]. A soup, sometimes kasha, bread or biscuits. And you went to sleep.

One night I hid it for the next morning, to have something for breakfast. The forty grams of bread, the 'payok' [ration]. I wrapped it in a towel, tied it in knots so that I could not untangle in the night, fastened it. No way, I couldn't bear my hunger, had to eat the piece of bread, you were hungry like hell.

There were all kinds of people with us, the Kyrgyz from Middle [Central] Asia, from Alma-Ata, Tashkent... they basically didn't eat pork fat but they also got it as 'payok.' So they traded the pork fat for sugar, and we had some pork fat which we could fry, do something with it.

One day I got some biscuits from them, had the 'payok,' and collected biscuits from all the others, three hundred grams. I'll take all those biscuits now, so that no one sees me, put them into this can of water, and I'll eat all of it and I'll be full. I did but an hour later I was hungry again, it was all nothing, the food was too light, I had no fat to put on it.

Later, as I remember, those units were dissolved, we were to be sent elsewhere, but we just ran away. I ran to a kolkhoz with one more guy. It was a German [18](#) kolkhoz [19](#). They had everything there: bread, buns, whatever you wanted. One day someone says, 'You'll chop wood for the kitchen.' And I had never had an axe in my hand at home, had never done it. It was their way of making fun of me. I say, 'Pokazhitye!' [Show me!]. They showed me how to chop wood, I learned it quickly and started chopping.

We worked for a week, bread as much as you want, milk as much as you want, cream as much as you want, cottage cheese as much as you want, heaven on earth. One day some plainclothes Ruskies came, 'Who works here?' And one German lady came to warn me, 'Mikhail Gregoryevich,

the Ruskies are here!' She told me to hide somewhere.

Very well, because they caught the other deserters and me and one other guy hid, they didn't find us. They took the other ones to prison, or who knows where, hard labor. We stayed but a week later they also got us.

Some women came, but they were from the military, officers, only dressed in aprons, disguised that way. They see we can't really speak Russian. 'Your papers!' 'I don't have them.' 'Where are they?' 'With the army.' 'O ladno, podozhdi' [Well then, you wait]. They checked the other guy and took us both. Had their guns at the ready, otherwise we would have punched them and ran.

They took us to the 'zheleznnye dorogi' [railways] to work. I wore the Soviet uniform. It was the Okruzhnaya Zhelaznaya Doroga [rail beltway] near Moscow. The Germans were approaching, they were just ten kilometers away, and we were working there. When the German started shelling, he destroyed everything. When he destroyed, everyone went their side. One in this direction, another one in that one...

They took me to a kind of... how to say it? Swamp. A boggy area that you could only leave in winter time when it froze. We worked hard there, there was no bread, nothing, just a bit of soup, a bit of borsht. That borsht, on a single cabbage leaf that floated in it, such was the borsht.

But what can you expect when the Russian guards themselves had noting to eat. The 'prorab' ate the same as I did. There were Greeks there, there were various nationalities. I thought once, if my parents only knew where their little boy was, the little Samuel, they wouldn't want to believe. At home, I didn't do anything and I didn't know how, because no one taught me. I thought my parents would do everything for me. And so when I left home, I couldn't do anything.

One day we learned Kaganovich [20](#) was to fly in for an inspection. One Greek guy tells me, 'Ty Yevrey, on Yevrey. Podiydi do nyevo-zhel' [You're Jewish, he's Jewish. Go and talk to him!] That was the advice he gave me. 'Ask him why you're here,' he says. 'I'm a prisoner because I committed a heavy crime, but you haven't, so why are you here?'

When the man arrived, I came up to him and said, 'Tovarishch, ya taki i taki ya tu popal, ya komsomolets [21](#), ya ne znayu pochemu ya tu zdyes popal, ya khochyu do armyi idti, ya molodoy chelovyek.' [Comrade, my name is so and so, I've been put here, I'm a Komsomol member, I don't know why I'm here, I want to go to the army, I'm a young man].

'Nichevo nye nada, kak vasha familia?' [No problem, what's your name?] He wrote it down and a week later they came for me and took me by plane and conscripted me into a unit, but it was a 'stroyityelnyy batalyon' [construction battalion].

I got there and there were many boys there, familiar ones and unfamiliar ones, and there a Lieutenant Volokh, and he was a 'Yevrey' [a Jew]. He says, 'Listen guys, remember not to tell anyone you're Yevreys, say nothing about your ethnic origin, because there's greater anti-Semitism here than in Poland.

The Ukrainians have a grudge against you because as the Germans advance, Jews flee, and they [Ukrainians] cannot buy anything, prices are exorbitant, because Jews buy everything out. That's why there's hatred.'



I found myself in Kharkov [Editor's note: actually Stalingrad], I don't even know how, they took us there, and Lieutenant Volokh says, 'It'll be a regular, official unit, a stroyityelny batalyon. We need supplies and you'll be in charge of that.'

They set up a base in Stalingrad, there were several thousand of us, including ten Poles from Zapadnaya Ukraina. I was the [supply] chief, I went to the Rai-Vyzh-Tov-Ga base [probably abbreviation for Raionniy Vyzhiy Tovaroviy Garnizon, the 'upper district supplies garrison']. We went for supplies there, to get provisions.

I was given a truck and two boys from Kishinev [Moldavians] to carry the sacks. In Stalingrad itself, there was no one to talk to, there were either armless or legless men or just some young girls. I loaded the cargo and a crowd of people, refugees, follows us, crying, 'Sir, give us some sugar, give us this, give us that.' It was horrible, but the commander said, 'I catch you on the smallest deficit, you go before the squad.' So everyone was afraid.

Then to the front. My unit, the 'pyadyesyat pyatyi-dyevyanosta vosmoy' battalion [Battalion 55-98], I remember it like it was today, went to the front, to the front line. I had the truck. The store man says, 'We have no sugar, sakhara nyet.' I tell him, 'I'm here, I'll bring it.'

The head of another warehouse had everything, except warm shirts. I tell him, 'I have warm shirts, warm underwear, warm trousers, warm jackets and boots. I'm putting it all on the truck, you'll have it soon.' And he says, 'You'll get vodka, we have sakhar, we have everything.'

When I came back to my unit my commanding officers saw I had a whole crate of vodka without any documents for it. 'Oh!' he says, 'davay tu vsyo, job tvayu mat [give it all here, for fuck's sake],' so that there was something to drink. When there was no vodka, you drank o-de-kolon [eau de cologne], then you belched for a couple of days.

I lived in a village near Stalingrad, on the Volga. In a small wooden house, not with the unit, because I had to mind the storerooms. I slept there, there was a very nice lady called Anushka there, she told me all kinds of stories. One afternoon German planes appear, four fly away, four fly up and drop bombs.

To be honest, I had never had to do with it before. And the woman tells me, 'Breathe with the bombs, if you don't, it'll rip your lungs apart, breathe. And remember the bomb never falls vertically, as the plane moves, so the bomb falls like this [diagonally],' she explained to me.

We suffered like for several days. And one day we finally started withdrawing delicately through that volley of bombs, but then we mobilized ourselves and, towards Stalingrad! And we started giving those Krauts an awful licking [22](#). The war raged on, my unit was broken up, I was left without a unit, without anything. I had a gun and they ordered me: stay here, do this, stand guard. Things like that.

We recaptured Stalingrad and we... dispersed like hell [the units got separated from each other]. The Germans are shelling, the fight goes for each and every house. And people fled. You want to get to the other side [of the Volga] but you can't do that unless you're wounded or sick.

So one Russian guy tells me, 'I'll bandage you, you bandage me, and we'll put some blood on it.' I went to the ferry. 'Davay!' We set off, but the ferry is very run-down. I had, I remember, the last

portion of sugar. I thought, 'Before I die, I'll eat everything I have, sugar and some other tidbits.'

The German started shelling, and the ferry leans more and more, until it starts taking water. From this side, and this one, and this one. 'My God, I'm the chosen one, I'm the only one here. You save me here, I'm with You. Fear nothing!' that's how I was talking to myself out loud.

The town on the other side was called Krasnosvoboda [correctly: Krasnoslobodsk]. And where to go now? Neither do I know anyone here, nor do I have anything with me. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink, and I'm sleepy. I went straight ahead, there was some bulrush, a meter taller than myself, I hid there and fell asleep.

I wake up in the morning, some soldier calls me, 'Pan! Z Polshchy?' [Sir! You from Poland?]. 'Da!' I say. 'To davay!' [Come on then!]. We got together. 'What do you have in the rucksack? 'A bit of whole meal flour. But I have no spichky, matches.' 'I have some.' We filled a 'kotielok,' a pot, with water from a creek. It smelled badly, but we were hungry.

He says, 'We'll make fire, only God forbid us from setting the bushes on fire.' We walked for half a day to leave the bushes behind us, lest we set them on fire, it was a steppe. We finally found a place, some Russian passed, a Kyrgyz woman came up. 'Parinyok, chto vy dyelayetye? [What are you doing here, boys?]. I say, 'Kushat dyelayem' [Cooking a meal]. 'Podozhditye!' [Wait!]. She gave us a piece of bread, dug it out of a piece of cloth.

We're walking through the shrubs, day and night. We finally reached a road. No vehicle, no train, no railroad, what to do? They caught us again and conscripted us into a unit. They didn't ask who, what, just caught us. Gathered fifty runaways whose units had been broken up.

When, what unit was it? Hard to say, we toiled so hard, in Omsk-Sibirsk, in Novosibirsk... In Novosibirsk, we worked at some mine. And there also they gave you the 'payok,' bread coupons for a whole week, a whole month. There was enough of everything there, we received a kilogram of bread each, and it was good.

The year 1943, word came a Polish army was being organized [the Berling Army] [23](#). Somehow we got to Moscow. How, what way, I don't remember. There were several of us because some Russian officer said, 'Your army is mobilizing itself.' And that's it, but how to get there? Some Russian says he goes there [by car]. And that's how we reached Wanda Wasilewska's [24](#) headquarters. There they immediately ask us: how many of you are there? We were four or five, said ten, and were issued a thick blanket, bar of chocolate, soap, towels and more, for each one.

A Rusky says, 'We'll take you to Kivertse. [Editor's note: actually Syeltse on the Oka river, near Riazan, some 180 km south-east of Moscow, where the 1st Tadeusz Kosciuszko Infantry Division was being formed.] I'll give you a lift, we'll stop one of our trucks on the road and I'll tell them to take you further.

On your way, our kolkhozes will be obliged to feed you. And, like here, instead of ten, say there's twelve of you, you'll get more bread.' And the kolkhozes fed us. We eventually reached Kivertse [Syeltse] on the Oka. A huge camp, thousands of people. They had released prisoners, all those Poles, from the forced-labor camps in Siberia.

They had legs wrapped up in rags, a sorry sight. I looked at those people and said to myself, 'Instead of putting them in hospital and giving them a treatment, they are training them to send them to the front.' Those people were wasted by starvation, by misery, by everything. Some were frostbitten.

And so they took us for a week or a month. [Editor's note: This is unlikely, the basic training took at least two months.] They taught us the drill, how to care for your gun, how to clean the barrel, all the things a soldier needs to know. It was Syeltse on the Oka.

We had training in the fields, learned to fold the overcoats, the rucksack, stabbing the straw with the pin [bayonet], pecking at it... There were those straw dummies, we stabbed them with bayonets... Shooting at the trees, we had shooting targets, just for fun.

We were there for three weeks and the 1st division [25](#) already went to the front. We stayed in the second one [2nd Henryk Dabrowski Infantry Division] because it had not yet reached its planned size, and then to the front. And we started moving westwards. I found myself in the 2nd division, 4th regiment [anti-tank artillery], a 76-mm battery. About seventy people in the battery.

There were many Jews in my battery. Some had been deported to Russia, others fled from the Germans. There were many, many officers, generals - highly experienced, very intelligent for who got deported [to Russia]? Rich people, and the rich had the money [to pay for education] those were learned people.

I had a guy named Liebert as neighbor. Spoke seven languages so they immediately made him a political officer, he was the commander. He was with me in the military. A very delicate, very intelligent man. There was also an acquaintance of mine from Drohobycz, Lojfter, the school headmaster's son, the second in command of a 4th regiment unit.

The pre-war officers all said they were just private soldiers. They concealed the fact they were officers because the Ruskies spied [26](#). Every fifth day or every week they told us to undress, checked what we had in our pockets, whether we weren't spies. Called you [for an interrogation].

They [the Russians] had the objective of identifying the enemies of the people [27](#). There were various methods, I myself was sometimes called in the night, 'Mikhail Grigorovich, davay, shelter so and so.' They asked where I was from, who my parents were, whether they weren't rich, whether I had any relatives abroad.

That was the biggest [most difficult] question. I had a sister abroad, I had brothers abroad, but I didn't say that because if I had, they would have shot me immediately. I said, 'No, no, I have no one,' and that's it. I behaved well. Didn't drink, didn't smoke, did everything that was my duty. Because there was one way, to beat the German, to liberate the country, that was the objective. And each one of us understood that.

There was already talk about the killing of Jews. But what happened to my family I learned only towards the end of the war when I wrote to a neighbor of ours. I asked the neighbors whether my mother and brother had received my letters.

I later met the neighbors' sons, they joined the army, told me everything, from A to Z [what happened to my family]. It was 1944. And officially the Holocaust didn't take place, everything was

kept secret. No one knew what was going on.

It was the Ukrainians who denounced my brother when we went to the front. The Germans had put him to work. He was returning from work in the night, after curfew, a German went by, the neighbor got to the fence in a leap and says, 'A Jew, he's a Jew!'

My brother tried to negotiate the fence and that's where they shot him, [Filip], my younger brother. I had documents that my family had been murdered, end of story, that I was left alone in the world, that's what the paper said, the family murdered, the house burned down....

When the Germans came, my brother-in-law, Friedman, went into hiding, poor guy. Someone informed that there, in the hay, a Jew was hiding. He had his wife and kids with himself. The gendarme stabbed the hay with a bayonet to see whether there was anyone inside, and the child didn't cry, afraid not to betray its father. And they didn't find him. But a time came when his wife and children were shot on the street for being Jews.

The second sister also hid, somewhere else. And my mother, with one more sister, went, as they called in Drohobycz, 'for the oil' [to steal from the pipe]. That's how they earned money. Some Ukrainians saw it but there was no problem. But one day one of those Ukrainians got drunk and told the Germans.

They came, killed them outright, all of them. I was told all of that when I was in the military. All my people, sisters, brothers, cousins, all killed. The whole family wasted away, exterminated, to the root, eradicated.

Eventually we got, I don't remember precisely... to Warsaw. So I covered the entire combat trail. I stormed the Odra, was at Siekierki [a major tank battle], captured Warsaw, crossed the Vistula... At one point I demonstrated heroism, was awarded with the Battlefield Merit medal [Polish military decoration, 1943-1992] for it.

We were storming Warsaw. A German division stood opposite us. I went for reconnaissance to take a captive to obtain information. And I succeeded in taking one. We snatched a sentry who fell asleep. I took him back and he told us everything, what units, where, everything, from A to Z.

I received various decorations for that, they wrote about me in a newspaper... You had to have a lot of courage, because it was a whole kilometer away from our lines, in the night. It's dark, you can't use the flashlight because the Germans will see you. I placed stones along the way to know my way back. For if I had gone the wrong way, I would have gotten into enemy territory.

I was in the artillery, 76-mm pieces. They fired far, five, six kilometers. You had to do reconnaissance. I went to the first line, watched, and reported to our commanding officer. But most often my job was to get in the night to, say, a church, climb to the very top of it, to set up a binocular there and observe the enemy.

Our artillery's compass and mine were aligned. I watched them fire. If he fired short, I told him to correct it. If he hit the target, I said 'Right on.' There was that commanding officer, he often went with me, we sat together and watched. I had to make sure the enemy didn't see me while I saw him.

We got to Warsaw. They [the Home Army] [28](#) staged the uprising [29](#) to forestall the Russians, to show that they captured the city. So the Russians stood back and showed... [Editor's note: stopped their advance]. The Germans murdered the uprising soldiers, and the uprising was all for nothing, we had to storm Warsaw.

Always politics, was it necessary for these 200,000 people to die? [Editor's note: 200,000 is the number of the Warsaw uprising's civilian casualties]. They did [gained] nothing, and the civilians were murdered and taken prisoner.

We were in Praga [right-bank part of Warsaw]. General Berling [30](#) ran around, saying, 'We'll go into action, we'll help them.' And half an hour later he was gone. They didn't permit him to cross the river. We ask where he is. 'Gone to Moscow for training.' To a military academy.

We already knew where he had been sent, we were aware. [Editor's note: General Berling arbitrarily decided to make an attempt to cross the Vistula to help the uprising, for which he was dismissed as commander of the 1st Army and sent to the Military Academy in Moscow]. We marched into [left-bank] Warsaw, and it's just smoldering ruins.

Not all regiments went to storm Berlin, some were excluded from the offensive, but our regiment somehow was not and I got to Berlin. In Berlin, I was on Hermann Strasse, it was a horror! The fight went for every house, relentless, for every apartment, every floor, a bloodbath. I don't even know how I survived. I remember I found myself in the battlefield, we fought with bayonets.

At some point I fell down, horses trampled on me. I fainted out of fear, out of fright. I came to around five or six in the morning, I look where I am. I'm lying here alone, but I know that my people are not far. I hear thumping, so I pressed my head against the ground, it was the Germans marching past.

I crawled for some kilometer. The Poles - that saved my life. And there was an investigation, 'Where were you, why did you go to the German?' I say, 'Why should I go to the German?' 'So where were you?' I say, 'I don't know myself, there was fighting. I fell.

Leave me alone because I'm exhausted and frightened. I'm all bruised and sore, how frightened I was before I got back to you!' 'And whom did you talk to?' 'No one! Ah, bullshit, I'll say no more.' I was laughing stock, the Russian officers say to me, 'Gdye ty bil, Mikhail Grigoryevich, pachemu ty seychas prishol?' [Where were you, why have you come back only now?]

In Germany, in Berlin, there was enough of everything, the cellars were stocked with food, whatever you wanted. The Germans were good administrators, they knew how to preserve food, they had plenty of everything. Only there did we start to eat and drink our fill. And whatever we wanted, they did for us.

What the Germans did to us, we had the right to do to the Germans. But I, as a Jew, wasn't interested in those things, because there's a God and He will hold everyone accountable. It's not my business.

We gathered on 8th May [the day Nazi Germany surrendered], I remember, on a square. We started firing off, rejoicing, that the war is over. If the war's over, then everyone went to get some rest. And the Germans had mined the area. No one paid attention, people died... I also forgot

myself in this happy cannonade.

Happy, we're going to fight, to liberate, to see the lands from which we came. That was everybody's dream, to go back home. Some Poles returned to their families even on the way [on the combat trail]. I didn't, because my family wasn't there anymore, so I didn't go to Drohobycz but went with the army.

The units were being separated [in Berlin], we found ourselves in Kielce [city some 160 km south of Warsaw]. The Home Army was active there, disturbed Jews. We were stationed in the village of Bokówka, a few kilometers from Kielce, I spent fourteen days there or something like that.

### • After the war and later life

I rode on horseback to town, got shot at many times... And there we were demobilized, the general demobilization order came [on 1st July 1945]. We returned to civilian life, and it is then I met my [future] wife [Krystyna Sobczyk, 1917-2001]. I fell in love, was the happiest man in the world. And that's how my life began.

There was a cool [dancing] party in Bokowka, that's where I met her... I went to dance, and there tables, the place's packed. There was this blonde girl. The boys, the Russians, tell me, 'Don't even approach her, she refuses everyone.' She'll refuse a guy like me? Elegant, spurred boots, dressed up...

A decent haircut. I bowed before her and we danced until the whole room started applauding. I was a bit sloshed, know what I mean. We danced, and I say, 'Boys, this will be my wife.' They looked at me strangely, thinking something's wrong with me, but I tell them, 'Don't look at me like that, she'll be my wife.'

The party was drawing to an end, and I tell the boys I've been invited by the lady. She has an apartment, everyone will be able to take a bath. She will prepare a dinner, but you have to give your officer's word no one will touch anything. We came in the evening, the cabbage soup is waiting, steaks, coffee.

After dinner everyone had a bath, and went to bed. In the morning we got up, thanked her, and I approach her and say, 'Krysia, my dear, we're meant for each other.' She says, 'Sir, I have a husband in the military, an officer, on the front... If [it turns out] he's dead, then... I like you too, but at this point...'

I went away for a moment, and one of my mates immediately says, 'He's a Jew!' She replies, 'I don't care for that.' Our commander was with us. 'What kind of friends are you?' he says. 'You sat at the same table, he's gone out and you immediately say he's a Jew. What kind of friends are you?! What's wrong with being a Jew anyway?'

Jews have been philosophers, artists, doctors... What do you have against the Jew?' And he tells me so that the other guy can hear, 'Mietek, don't associate with these people, these are not good friends.'

So that's how we met. One day she says, 'Mietek, you know what, I had this dream, the Jewish cemetery, something gold glitters there, I come closer and there's a tomb like this [shows hands



arranged for the priestly blessing gesture]' I say, 'I am precisely the ha kohen - I'm the one [who blesses].

[The blessing hands are a symbol of priestly lineage, placed on tombstones]. 'Mietek, it's only you I'm telling this.' A couple of days later I arrived on horseback and I say, 'Kryisia, my dear, you have children.

I want nothing from you, we're just friends, but I will help you - there's the kahal [in Kielce], the Jewish community council, I'll have your children dressed from head to toe there.' I got leather jackets, chocolate, halva, a whole sack of 'provisions.' Because I told them I had a wife and children. The neighbors look at me, 'What a Jew!' Because people had learned by then.

I say to her, 'Kryisia, my dear, we're meant for each other, remember, I feel it in my heart. I've had various girls, young and beautiful, but nothing compares to you.' She says, 'Mietek, until I get word my husband's dead...' And one day I come in the morning and someone knocks on the door.

'Does Mrs. Sobczyk live here?' 'Yes.' 'Is she home?' 'Kryisia,' I call, 'there's someone to see you!' And the messenger says, 'Your husband died on front so and so.' I say, 'Kryisia, are we meant for each other?' 'Okay, Mietek, from today you live with me. You go nowhere else, you sleep nowhere else, this is where we'll live.

I don't care what they say about you. You're a bachelor, I'm married, but I also fell in love with you, I've never loved anyone like you. You're so kind, you didn't know me or anything and you gave me so much, you dressed my children...' And the boy [Krystyna's son] comes and says, 'At last I have a father. A military man, with a moustache.' And that's how he won my heart. Went out on the street, telling people he had a father, he'd fear no one from now on.

I left the army. My commander told me, 'Stay, they'll make you an officer soon.' But I said, 'I don't want to.' I wasn't itching to become an officer, because I didn't want to have anything to do with the military, I wanted to be a civilian. I had enough. But I still wore the uniform, and still carried the gun with me. No one cared.

The Home Army guys were turning up. One night I see something's happening on the street. I approach, our soldiers are beating a guy to death, I ask them why. 'Because he's from there! [the AK]' I say, 'May be, but no one gave you the order! I make the call, ten MPs will come here and take you away!' They let him go, but they beat him badly, broke his hand.'

It turned out the guy was my wife's friend. One day I come home, he sits there. When he saw me, he called, 'This is the man who saved my life!' And then, 'I wouldn't have told you, but you see, there's this gang, a big stink is coming, they'll be killing Jews, throwing them out of trains...' It was 1946. He's telling me all this.

I said to my wife, 'Kryisia, if this is so, if you love, what will you do?' 'Where you are, there I am.' And within a single day we left the children with my wife's parents, because we couldn't take them [with ourselves] and went to Walbrzych [town in south- western Poland, some 300 km west of Kielce]. We left everything we had. A few days later the tragedy in Kielce [31](#) took place.

We arrived in Walbrzych, went to sleep with all those refugees, repatriates. We spent the night there, and in the morning I went to fix us up with a place to stay and a job. The town office, a long

queue. I finally got to see the official, I ask him who's in charge here, and he says, 'Who are you? Who told you to sniff around here?'

And this other guy, a lieutenant [probably another veteran looking for lodgings], pulls out his gun and says to the official, 'Come on, take off this fur coat, take it all off, you son of a bitch, you reactionary, where were you? With the Germans, you were a Volksdeutscher [32](#)? And now you work here?' And the official goes, 'Gentlemen, please, don't kill me.' I say, 'No one's going to kill you, but you beware and give us what we're entitled to.'

I've come here with my wife and children and I have no place to stay.' He says, 'Don't worry, we'll find something for you.' [Veterans of the 1st Polish Army had the right to farms in the post-German territories]. 'For now, you spend the night at this German woman's, and in the morning I'll have something specially for you.' A detached house, a German lady still lived in it.

All furnished! I had never seen anything like that in my life! The furniture made of white birch, gold birch, armchairs, beds beautifully polished. And a beautiful garden. Everything from A to Z. The cellars - full of food. Four rooms and a kitchen downstairs, and three rooms with a kitchen upstairs. And a car on top of that. 'Well,' I say, 'it suits us just fine.'

I took my wife, we went there, took out the food we had. The German woman gave us all she had, sugar and all, waited on us very decently. She wants for no one to harass her, for her to be able to live in peace. I say, 'I won't allow anyone to harm you. Eat what's yours, I don't want anything. We'll take nothing from you, I guarantee you peace.' [Editor's note: Mr. Najman doesn't know what happened to the woman afterwards, he lived in the house for a short time only.]

There were four mines there, I go to one of them. The director. Good day, I tell him what my profession is, that I left the military, I want to work because I have a wife and children to provide for. We weren't officially married. I already have a place to stay, and whatever job you can offer me, I'll take it.'

He says, 'You see, there's this job: there are the mines, all these workers, and we have a problem feeding them. I'll give you three trucks and two Germans with guns and you'll drive around, offering coal [in exchange for food]. And so I rode like that for a month but then something didn't click.'

The director was an endek [33](#) from before the war, I learned only later. I ask why I am fired. He says, 'You got it wrong, there was a misunderstanding. You didn't understand what we meant. You'll work, you'll be the head of the whole [supplies department], we congratulate you.' [Editor's note: The change was probably the result of the fact that Mr. Najman had joined the party].

Meantime, the party [34](#) was organizing itself. Some miners came from Katowice and Sosnowiec, 'Will you join the party?' 'Well, why not, of course!' And I joined. They tell me, 'You know, you have to watch your step, the director above you, all these people must be gotten rid of.'

They're all of noble birth and enemies of People's Poland...' I went to see the director. 'You see, I don't fire you, but a new government will come, and you have a past that I don't.' I worked there for two or three months and I hear, 'You'll be the head of supplies for all the mines.'

I worked in that position for almost a year and finally the party calls me. 'Comrade Najman, we've watched how you work, because no one wants to work as hard as you do, ride the tractors, organize the exchange, no matter what the weather, in freezing cold...

You didn't look at the money, only to feed these miners, for this mine to operate as it should. We have a directorial position for you at the gardening enterprise.' 'I have no experience.' 'You'll learn, the most important part is to plant, you're a great manager, you've shown what you can do, demonstrated your talent.'

I lived like that for five years [without getting officially married] because I didn't need that, I was an executive. But one beautiful day my wife tells me, 'Why the fibbing if you can marry me.' 'You're right, let's go,' I say.

That day I was in town by chance, in the registrar's office, I went to the chief registrar himself. 'Listen, I live like that [in a common-law marriage], I'd like to make it official.' 'Do you have any ID?' 'I have only this military ID, because I'm from beyond the Bug, but my wife has everything.' 'You can call your wife.'

'She isn't here, she doesn't have her birth certificate.' 'Come tomorrow, please.' And two days later my wife had all the required documents. I took two colleagues from the office for witnesses, I had all the papers myself, and we got married [in 1950].

I found my brother Michal only after the war. A friend comes and tells me there's a guy named Najman in Poznan. 'I think he may be your brother, I talked to him, he says he's a Najman.' 'And where is he?' I ask. 'In Poznan.' I took my wife, took a car from the office, went officially on a business trip.

Paid for the gas myself so that no one could find fault with me, and went. We arrive in Poznan, start asking people, no one knows anything. I ask one lady, and she says, 'Why do you ask me, there's the town hall, go there.' [We did].

'Who are you looking for?' 'Michal Najman.' 'There's one, born 1913.' I say, 'It's... it's my brother. And where does he live?' 'Near the Okraglak [Poznan's characteristic, round-shaped department store], house number so and so.' He was still in the army.

We climb up the stairs, and he already had a child, his wife was pregnant. I enter, he was sleeping, and when he saw me, he was completely dumbfounded. 'It's you, my brother!' And we both started crying. 'Please, meet my wife.' She wasn't pretty, and when my wife entered, the blonde, the other one looked like she was about to choke.

My brother says, 'You have a very pretty wife.' My wife kissed him and says, 'Let's go to a café, we won't be talking here.' She didn't like the place. My brother's wife says she isn't going, and my brother says immediately, 'This is my brother, I'll go everywhere with him if he invites me, wants to talk to me face to face, you can't say anything.' 'And why is his wife going with you?' 'Because she's his wife.'

In the end we went to a café, talked, I'm telling him my story. 'Mietek,' he says, 'I know she's ugly, but, you know, I was alone here, she had an apartment... I was looking for you, couldn't find you... You know how it is with a man, he'll fall in love eventually... She's pregnant, I can't leave here, it's

my child.'

And we sat like that for two hours until we woke up. 'Mietek, go,' he says, 'I'm still in service, carrying a gun, I defended the citadel.' [probably: stormed. The Poznan citadel was defended fiercely by the Germans and captured by the advancing Red Army in February 1945.]

And so it went. He visited me all the time, I was in a directorial position so I invited him. I helped him, I had the top salary. I had everything, so he was always well equipped. He came, we spent time together. Then I fixed him up with a job in Poznan, a good one. He started earning decently and so it went. After all, who am I supposed to like if not my own brother?

My next assignment was as the chief executive of the Ogrodnicze Zakłady Handlowe, an enterprise selling fruit and vegetable produce [early 1950s]. When I came, the company was running at a loss, but I soon turned it around until it really swooshed.

When I came to a purchase outlet, I said, 'Boy, we give you money, you can buy for a hundred thousand, but you have to sell it all. You see to what needs to be done, you can make money yourself, but the company must show a profit, remember.'

I worked there for two or three years, I don't remember. One day a committee came from Wrocław, a director, and he says, 'We're transferring you, Najman, you'll now be the director of a whole group, overseeing all the fruit and vegetable trading enterprises in a whole province.'

I had some beautiful furniture, started transporting it, wearing it in the process, but I couldn't refuse, and so I found myself in Koszalin [city in northern Poland, some 170 km west of Gdańsk]. Sixteen provinces [Editor's note: there were seventeen provinces in Poland at the time], and we're in the sixteenth place in terms of business performance.

Everyone's only interested in getting drunk and doing deals on the side. I held a meeting with the employees. I say, 'I don't go into what you did before, I'm not interested in that. I won't draw any consequences because I have no time for that. We're in the sixteenth place, it can't be like that, I'll give you instructions how to work.'

Every person who fails to observe these instructions, I will fire disciplinarily because I have such powers. There'll be no one to help you. And this is how I wish you work.' Each director heard, 'You'll be evaluated on the basis of quarterly performance. As for the rest, do as you please. But if I come and your unit doesn't show a profit, you can start looking for another job.'

I had inspectors, knew what was going on in the field. What they said about me, I didn't care, but in my presence they had to show respect. Take their hat off, go to the secretary if they wanted to see me. I had them wait an hour or two, or told them to come the next day. I was indeed very busy. And I spent a few years working there.

One day someone from the party comes to me and says, 'Najman, we have this egg- and poultry-producing enterprise, a major exporter. The recipient is Germany. And the Germans [their customs] stop the shipments, we don't know why. In the first month when I came, we shipped a railroad car of produce and it was stopped.'

And the staff made sure everything was in order, that nothing was scratched or whatever. If a shipment is stopped, there's no dollars, no gold, and the country earns nothing. The decision is made to go to Zgorzelec [border town between Poland and Germany, 120 km west of Wrocław]. I went to see what was going on, it was a serious matter.

My wife says, 'Take two pretty girls with you. I know Germans, I worked for Germans. Take a bottle of good brandy.' And we went by car. We talked and my shipment is let through, everything's in order, what joy in my heart, I don't remember ever being so happy.

That I managed to fix an important problem because it occurred to me to go to the border which was something the mandarins at the main office never did. A shipment didn't pass? Goodbye. Some three hundred girls worked there, a huge team. On my return I held a meeting and I tell them, 'Our shipment has passed. Keep working as you have so far, everything's in order.'

The problem was that we were sending more cars than specified in the customs documentation. That's why the German stops them.'

Everyone's happy, the committee singing with joy. I arrive at a meeting in Warsaw, and there's this director who obviously doesn't like me. Najman, Najman, Schmaltzman - he's clearly unhappy about something. 'How should I call you, Najman or Nejman?' That's what interests him. I say, 'Quite simply, Najman.'

And he says, 'We've been here for a long time and they kept stopping our shipments, and here a new manager comes and his shipments go through. How do you do it, comrade N a j m a n?' I say, 'I don't do anything, the people work as usual, observing their duties, everyone knows their performance targets, knows what they should do...'

They work well, and they receive bonuses and low-interest loans for that.' 'But you must know some secret,' he says, 'as a nation, that's what it seems to me.' I say, 'In my nation, even if someone dupes me, I'm never supposed to admit it because others will laugh at me.'

The [party's] committee replies, 'What, you don't like the fact that director [Najman] doesn't have a university diploma, just business college education? That's not much, is that all?' He stopped the guy in his tracks. 'We know what you mean, but it won't pass! This man covered the entire combat trail, and you didn't. He's been awarded high state decorations, he stormed the Odra, the Nysa, fought at Siekierki, in all the battles.'

He was in Russia, in Stalingrad, was in hard labor, and he complains about nothing. And you bear a grudge against him only because he's a Jew. You weren't on the front yourself, you weren't anywhere, and you have the audacity to criticize him for his Jewish origin?' I thanked the man, said it was enough. I was proud, I got angry, said it was enough of the platitudes. And I left. Ethnic background played a great role those days. It was the 1960s already [35](#).

My last assignment was a purchase outlet in Swinoujście [town in the north- western tip of Poland, on the Baltic Sea, on the border with Germany, some 120 km west of Koszalin]. I arrived here, I look around, the air's beautiful. They gave me a three-bedroom apartment with a kitchen in the very center of the town, with a telephone.

I started working at the purchase outlet. But it wasn't it, I didn't like the people I was supposed to work with. I fell ill, a doctor came, examined me. I tell him, 'So many years in war, more than twenty years a manager, I feel I've had enough.' He says, 'That's right. I'll give you a [certificate], you'll appear before the medical board.'

The board awarded me first-group disability benefits. My health wasn't okay. I went into therapy, because my nerves were really shattered. So many years, the war and all, the murders, no relatives, no nothing... And so I stayed here, in Swinoujscie. And I called it quits on everything.

But you've got to make your living somehow. I tell my wife I'll open a small shop. And I opened this kind of stall. When I worked as executive all those years, my wife stayed at home. She ran the stall for several years. Everything worked great.

Later, when I turned 80 or 75, and she reached a similar age, there was no one to run it anymore, we sold the business and end of story. In 1990 we went into retirement. My wife had some 700 or 800 zlotys a month, I had 1,300 [above-average at the time]. It was enough, we had our small house and we lived in peace.

We never had a church wedding, I didn't want to and she didn't either. And we lived like that for over fifty years, brought up the children, without any divorces or anything. I made sure my children got the proper education, sent one to be an officer, my daughter went into university, got married, I helped her build a house. I never told them anything about religion.

I lived normally, didn't christen them, didn't do anything of the sort. That's how they lived and they married Polish guys. Others said they were Jewesses. The daughter, Daisa, lives in the next street from me. One neighbor says, 'Let the Jewess sweep the floor!' And my daughter says, 'What do you have against me? You bow to a Jewess, kneel before her [an allusion to the cult, widespread in Poland, of the Holy Mary], and you call me a Jewess to insult me?'

My wife used to urge me to go to the synagogue. 'What for?' I asked her, 'and who'll earn our daily bread?' [Under communism, one could lose one's job or be expelled from the party for practicing religion]. 'To the synagogue! You must observe this. You're a chosen one, you've got to go.'

She went with me. She wasn't a Jewess but she was more observant than a Jewess would have been. She went to the synagogue and always said, 'I'm a Jewess, I have a Jewish husband.' Went with a Star of David pendant on her neck, was proud to wear it. Even my daughter liked it.

We went to a rabbi, and he says, 'From this day you're a Jewess.' That she had now converted. We went, I remember, to Szczecin, because in Walbrzych the synagogues were full of people. Such was the policy that it wasn't recommended to practice religion.

You had to stick to what earned you the daily bread, and besides, religion didn't really attract me. I didn't know how to pray, so I didn't go there. And it's not enough to just imitate [the gestures] like a clown just because you're inside.'

Later, after I stopped working, she started to observe it and I started going to synagogue. I was free, no longer had a boss, I did what I wanted. We went to Szczecin for the high holidays, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah. Then I went myself, every Saturday.



But I haven't been going for a couple of years now because I'm not allowed to for health reasons. I'm the kohen, I bless the people. When I pass, they cover their clothes, and I pray. God gave me this gift but I don't use it because my health doesn't allow me to. I say, 'Glory be to God in heavens, thank You for everything, and bless,' I say, 'my family in Israel and my family here, and bless all those Poles I care for.' I put on the tallit and read the psalm.

It's been almost three years since my wife died. She was 86. I didn't put a cross on her grave, nothing. My friends from the unit came, the Polish- Soviet friendship people, the Baptists, came and buried her.

The son-in-law from Israel called and asked to read this psalm for my wife. Psalm twenty third. And now every Saturday I read it and every second day I'm at the cemetery, I go to my wife to look, to talk. 'Krysia, I have no one else to talk to.'

My brother Michal used to come to us to Swinoujscie, to the seaside. He had such a job that he could spend time with us. Died some ten years ago [in 1993]. His wife died, at the age of 90, left two children, they are 50 or 60 today, daughters, both married.

I didn't have much contact with my step-brothers and sisters in America because those were my father's children from his first marriage. They sent me a package with some stockings, so what, my wife said, we don't need anything. Let them not exert themselves, there's no point going there [to the US].

From time to time we wrote letters and that's it. Once they sent me an invitation to go there, I refused, I didn't go because I didn't want to. My elder sister, the one from the first marriage, Besza, wrote me from America. To come as soon as possible with my wife and child. 'Even though you have a wife.' I have a Polish wife with children. 'Whoever, whatever.'

My wife didn't want to go so I didn't go, even though she said, 'If you have relatives there, go, leave me and that's it, I don't stand in your way.'

My daughter Sabina is in Israel. She'll be fifty now. She lives there with her husband, her son and daughter. He went there two years before her, found a job, everything, and then called her to come with the girls, for a month. She came for a month, he took their passports, and they stayed.

He was granted the citizenship, and they were. He's a regular Pole. They can't tell there [in Israel]. He'll say his father's a Jew, his father-in-law is a Jew. Went to pray with me too. I went to the prayer house and they confirmed he had been going with me every Saturday for the ceremony, for two years...

Knew his way around, a smart boy. Went to the rabbi, told him about all those things, and the rabbi says, 'Okay, we'll help you.' Took two years and they granted him the citizenship. His wife and children too. Went to do his army service and alright. Has a job, an apartment...

I've been to Israel, I like Israel very much, Jerusalem is an extremely beautiful place, the original marbles and all. The colors, the tidiness. In this respect, it's beautiful. And work. Work, as it should be, at the kibbutz. But there's no work for me there. There's only work for young people to whom the future belongs.

I won't contribute anything to Israel anymore. And I'm only a Jew by letter. I could get a benefit, it's not as low as in Poland, you could live off it. You get your food, get your drink, get the few zlotys so that you don't have to worry about tomorrow. There are no luxuries, but you'll get furniture for free, an apartment, all those other things. But I have everything here, so why go there to live on benefit?

How do I spend my time? I go to the hospital, a friend of mine's there. Every second day there's a funeral, I go, you have to make a speech, offer your condolences to the family. We recently created a special section for war veterans at the cemetery, a nice entrance, it took five years, we reached a deal, did it for us for a few zlotys.

I have a stretch there under my care, we lay the flowers, my friends are buried there. We gather, talk, do some official business. I'm always the one to go to an office. You have to do well, show that the Jew works, so that they don't say he's a Jew [an allusion to the stereotype of the scrounging Jew].

I sit at home and have peace of mind, wait for them to come to me and help me, this is my life. My wife died and I'm alone. It's good my grandson is here to help me, make lunch for me, dinner, do everything he can. I sometimes get some support from the community [36](#). I get medicines for free.

They help me, I can't say, whatever I ask them, they'll always be helpful. I was renovating the apartment, they helped, can't say a bad word about them. Show interest in how I live. When you're old, everyone shows concern. It's an advanced age, you know, it's good I can walk, I can talk, not everyone can do it at my age.

On Saturday I tie the tefillin, praise God for leaving me here, for being the only one here who observes Sabbath, no one else here does except me, I'm the only one. And I thank God for the past week, for giving me a good health, for giving me courage, for giving me strength to go through all this. And for everything I have, I thank only God, God is my Father. I say it quite normally, as it is, from the bottom of my heart, because except God, I have no one else in the world.

- **Glossary:**

## **[1](#) Jews in Drohobycz**

Before 1939, Drohobycz had large Jewish minority. It had 35,000 inhabitants then and 40 % were Jews. Jewish Presence in Drohobycz was first mentioned in the 15th century and the town's Jewish population in 1939 numbered from 15,000 to 17,000.

In 1939, the town's population was made up of 10,000 Poles, 10,000 Ukrainians and 15,000 Jews living in an uneasy coexistence. Most of Drohobycz Jews were killed by Nazis, many escaped east. Drohobycz Jews were sent to the Belzec extermination camp. Many of them were killed in the nearby forest of Bronice.

By 1944, 400 were still alive. Drohobycz was a hometown to Polish- Jewish 19th century revolutionary painter Maurycy Gotlieb and another famous Jewish writer, painter and artist, Bruno Schultz.

**2** Mickiewicz, Adam (1798-1855): Often regarded as the greatest Polish poet. As a student he was arrested for nationalist activities by the tsarist police in 1823. In 1829 he managed to emigrate to France and worked as professor of literature at different universities.

During the 1848 revolution in France and the Crimean War he attempted to organize legions for the Polish cause. Mickiewicz's poetry gave international stature to Polish literature. His powerful verse expressed a romantic view of the soul and the mysteries of life, often employing Polish folk themes.

**3** 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.

**4** Betar: Brith Trumplemor (Hebrew) meaning Trumplemor Society; right-wing Revisionist Jewish youth movement.

It was founded in 1923 in Riga by Vladimir Jabotinsky, in memory of J. Trumplemor, 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.

**5** Kaminska, Ida (1899-1980): Jewish actress and theater director. She made her debut in 1916 on the stage of the Warsaw theater founded by her parents. From 1921-28 she and her husband, Martin Sigmund Turkow, were the directors of the Varshaver Yidisher Kunsteater.

From 1933 to 1939 she ran her own theater group in Warsaw. During World War II she was in Lvov, and was evacuated to Kyrgyzia (Frunze). On her return to Poland in 1947 she became director of the Jewish theaters in Lodz, Wroclaw and Warsaw (1955-68 the E.R. Kaminska Theater).

In 1967 she traveled to the US with her theater and was very successful there. Following the events of March 1968 she resigned from her post as theater director and immigrated to the US, where she lived until her death. Her best known roles include the leading roles in Mirele Efros (Gordin), Hedda Gabler (Ibsen) and Mother Courage and Her Children (Brecht), and her role in the film The Shop on Main Street (Kadár and Klos, 1965).

Ida Kaminska also wrote her memoirs, entitled *My Life, My Theatre* (1973).

**6** Unemployment in prewar Poland: As in other countries, the economic crisis in Poland deepened from the end of 1929; sales of goods and output dwindled, and unemployment climbed. The drop in central budget revenues caused a budget deficit, and problems with export and foreign investors withdrawing their capital worsened the balance of payments.

In the 1930s the protracted economic crisis compounded the dissatisfaction in society. The majority of the rural population was living in abject poverty, and in the towns there was vast open unemployment among both manual and white-collar workers, and hidden unemployment among traders and artisans bereft of a clientele.

The deteriorating situation led to mounting social and ethnic-related tension and increasing openness to the influences of radical political groups.

## **7 Bench ghetto**

A form of discrimination applied against Jewish students at higher educational institutions in interwar Poland. In lecture halls separate seats were allocated to Jewish students and they were not allowed to sit elsewhere.

The bench ghetto was introduced in 1935 at the Lwow Polytechnic, and in 1937 the majority of the rectors of Polish higher educational institutions brought it in with the approval of the Ministry of Religious Confessions and Public Education. Jewish students, along with Polish students who supported them, protested by standing during lectures and not occupying any seats. Their protest was also supported by a few professors, including Tadeusz Kotarbinski.

**8** 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.

**9** Hitler's rise to power: In the German parliamentary elections in January 1933, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) won one- third of the votes. On 30th January 1933 the German president swore in Adolf Hitler, the party's leader, as chancellor.

On 27th February 1933 the building of the Reichstag (the parliament) in Berlin was burned down. The government laid the blame with the Bulgarian communists, and a show trial was staged.

This served as the pretext for ushering in a state of emergency and holding a re-election. It was won by the NSDAP, which gained 44% of the votes, and following the cancellation of the communists' votes it commanded over half of the mandates. The new Reichstag passed an extraordinary resolution granting the government special legislative powers and waiving the constitution for 4 years.

This enabled the implementation of a series of moves that laid the foundations of the totalitarian state: all parties other than the NSDAP were dissolved, key state offices were filled by party luminaries, and the political police and the apparatus of terror swiftly developed.

**10** German Invasion of Poland: The German attack of Poland on 1st September 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France.

(To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1st September 1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground.

To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1st September, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rd September, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.

**11** 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 Ukrainian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics.

**12** Flight eastwards, 1939: From the moment of the German attack on Poland on 1st September 1939, Poles began to flee from areas in immediate danger of invasion to the eastern territories, which gave the impression of being safer.

When in the wake of the Soviet aggression (17th September) Poland was divided into Soviet and German-occupied zones, hundreds of thousands of refugees from central and western Poland found themselves in the Soviet zone, and more continued to arrive, often waiting weeks for permits to cross the border. The majority of those fleeing the German occupation were Jews.

The status of the refugees was different to that of locals: they were treated as dubious elements. During the passport campaign (the issue of passports, i.e. ID, to the new USSR - formerly Polish - citizens) of spring 1940, refugees were issued with documents bearing the proviso that they were prohibited from settling within 100 km of the border.

At the end of June 1940 the Soviet authorities launched a vast deportation campaign, during which 82,000 refugees were transported deep into the Soviet Union, mainly to the Novosibirsk and Archangelsk districts. 84% of those deported in that campaign were Jews, and 11% Poles. The deportees were subjected to harsh physical labor.

Paradoxically, for the Jews, exile proved their salvation: a year later, when the Soviet Union's western border areas were occupied by the Germans, those Jews who had managed to stay put, perished in the Holocaust.

**13** Jews welcoming the Red Army: Poles often accuse the Jews of enthusiastically welcoming the Soviet occupiers, treating it as treason against the Polish state. In reality welcoming committees were formed not only by Jews, but also by Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians.

Some Jews active in left-wing organizations took literally the slogans promising that Soviet rule would bring equality, liberty and justice. Of course not all Jews were uncritical with regard to Soviet promises. Older people remembered the Russian pogroms of the Tsarist period (before the 1917 revolution), the wealthy feared for their property, and religious people were afraid of repression.

But information relayed back by those who had fled to central and western provinces of the ruthless treatment of the Jews by the Germans made the Jews pleased at the halt of the German advance eastward.

**14** 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.

**15** Deportations of Poles from the Eastern Territories during WWII: From the beginning of Soviet occupation of eastern Poland on 17th September 1939, until the Soviet-German war, which broke out on 21st June 1941, the Soviet authorities were deporting people associated with the former Polish authorities, culture, church and army.



Around 400,000 people were exiled from the Lwow, Tarnopol and Stanislawow districts, mostly to northern Russia, Siberia and Kazakhstan. Between 12th and 15th April as many as 25,000 were deported from Lwow only.

**16** Great Patriotic War: On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed.

Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

**17** Trudarmia (labor army): Created in the USSR during WWII. In September 1941 the commissioner of military affairs of Kazakhstan, Gen. A. Shcherbakov, acting upon an order issued by central authorities, ordered the conscription into the so-called labor army (trudarmia) of Polish citizens, mostly of Ukrainian, Belarus and Jewish nationality.

The core of the mobilized laborers consisted of men between 15 and 60 years of age and childless women. The laborers of trudarmia mostly returned to Poland as part of the repatriation scheme in 1946. The last wave of repatriates, mostly Jews, came back from the USSR between 1955 and 1957.

**18** German colonists: Ancestors of German peasants, who were invited by Empress Catherine II in the 18th century to settle in Russia.

**19** 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.

**20** Kaganovich, Lazar (1893-1991): Soviet Communist leader. A Jewish shoemaker and labor organizer, he joined the Communist Party in 1911. He rose quickly through the party ranks and by 1930 he had become Moscow party secretary-general and a member of the Politburo.

He was an influential proponent of forced collectivization and played a role in the purges of 1936-38. He was known for his ruthless and merciless personality. He became commissar for transportation (1935) and after the purges was responsible for heavy industrial policy in the Soviet Union. In 1957, he joined in an unsuccessful attempt to oust Khrushchev and was stripped of all his posts.

**21** Komsomol: Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education.

The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

**22** Stalingrad Battle: 17th July 1942 - 2nd February 1943. The South- Western and Don Fronts stopped the advance of German armies in the vicinity of Stalingrad. On 19th and 20th November 1942 the Soviet troops undertook an offensive and encircled 22 German divisions (330,000 people) and eliminated them.

On 31st January 1943 the remains of the 6th German army headed by General Field Marshal Paulus surrendered (91,000 people). The victory in the Stalingrad battle was of huge political, strategic and international significance.

**23** The Berling Army: in May 1943 the Tadeusz Kosciuszko 1st Infantry Division began to be formed in Syeltse near Ryazan. It was a Polish unit in the USSR, completely dependant on the Red Army. It was commanded by Colonel Zygmunt Berling.

By July 1943 16,000 Poles had enlisted to the 1st Division, most of them deportees expelled from eastern Poland in 1940. Lacking qualified Polish officers, most of whom had left USSR with the Anders' Army, the commanding positions were often given to Soviet officers.

In the fall of 1943 the 1st Division was sent to the front and fought in the battle of Lenino.

In September 1943 the 1st Corps of Polish Armed Forces in the USSR was formed, consisting of 3 divisions. Zygmunt Berling commanded the Corps. In March 1944 the 1st Corps was transformed into the 1st Polish Army. It numbered 78,000 soldiers.

The Army fought in Ukraine and took part in liberating the Polish territory from the German occupation. On 21st July 1944 in Lublin the 1st Army was combined with the Communist conspirational People's Army to form the Polish People's Army.

**24** Wasilewska, Wanda (1905-64): From 1934-37 she was a member of the Supreme Council of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). In 1940 she became a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. From 1941-43 she was a political commissary in the Red Army and editor of 'Nowe Widnokregi.'

In 1943 she helped to organize the Union of Polish Patriots and the Polish armed forces in the USSR. In 1944 she became a member of the Central Bureau of Polish Communists in the USSR and vice-chairperson of the Polish Committee for National Liberation.

After the war she remained in the USSR. Author of the social propaganda novels 'Oblicze Dnia' (The Face of the Day, 1934), 'Ojczyzna' (Fatherland, 1935) and 'Ziemia w Jarzmie' (Earth under the Yoke, 1938), and the war novel 'Teczka' (Rainbow, 1944).

**25** The 1st Kosciuszko Infantry Division: Tactical grouping formed in the USSR from May 1943. The victory at Stalingrad and the gradual assumption of the strategic initiative by the Red Army strengthened Stalin's position in the anti-fascist coalition and enabled him to exert increasing influence on the issue of Poland.

In April 1943, following the public announcement by the Germans of their discovery of mass graves at Katyn, Stalin broke off diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile and using the Poles in the USSR, began openly to build up a political base (the Union of Polish Patriots) and an army: the 1st Kosciuszko Infantry Division numbered some 11,000 soldiers and was commanded first by General Zygmunt Berling (1943-44), and subsequently by the Soviet General Bewziuk (1944-45).

In August 1943 the division was incorporated into the 1st Corps of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, and from March 1944 was part of the Polish Army in the USSR. The 1st Division fought at Lenino on 12-13 October 1943, and in Praga in September 1944. In January 1945 it marched into Warsaw, and in April-May 1945 it took part in the capture of Berlin. After the war it became part of the Polish Army.

**26** Political officer: These "commissars," as they were first called, exercised specific official and unofficial control functions over their military command counterparts. The political officers also served to further Party interests with the masses of drafted soldiery of the USSR by indoctrination in Marxist-Leninism.

The 'zampolit', or political officers, appeared at the regimental level in the army, as well as in the navy and air force, and at higher and lower levels, they had similar duties and functions.

The chast (regiment) of the Soviet Army numbered 2000-3000 personnel, and was the lowest level of military command that doctrinally combined all arms (infantry, armor, artillery, and supporting services) and was capable of independent military missions. The regiment was commanded by a colonel, or lieutenant colonel, with a lieutenant or major as his zampolit, officially titled "deputy commander for political affairs."

**27** Enemy of the people: Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

**28** Home Army (Armia Krajowa - AK): Conspiratorial military organization, part of the Polish armed forces operating within Polish territory (within pre-1st September 1939 borders) during World War II. Created on 14th February 1942, subordinate to the Supreme Commander and the Polish Government in Exile.

Its mission was to regain Poland's sovereignty through armed combat and inciting to a national uprising. In 1943 the AK had over 300,000 members. AK units organized diversion, sabotage, revenge and partisan campaigns. Its military intelligence was highly successful.

On 19th January 1945 the AK was disbanded on the order of its commander, but some of its members continued their independence activities throughout 1945- 47.

In 1944-45 tens of thousands of AK soldiers were exiled and interned in the USSR, in places such as Ryazan, Borovich and Ostashkov. Soldiers of the AK continued to suffer repression in Poland until 1956; many were sentenced to death or long-term imprisonment on trumped-up charges.

Right after the war, official propaganda accused the Home Army of murdering Jews who were hiding in the forests. There is no doubt that certain AK units as well as some individuals tied to AK

were in fact guilty of such acts. The scale of this phenomenon is very difficult to determine, and has been the object of debates among historians.

**29** **Warsaw Uprising 1944:** The term refers to the Polish uprising between 1st August and 2nd October 1944, an armed uprising orchestrated by the underground Home Army and supported by the civilian population of Warsaw.

It was justified by political motives: the calculation that if the domestic arm of the Polish government in exile took possession of the city, the USSR would be forced to recognize Polish sovereignty. The Allies rebuffed requests for support for the campaign. The Polish underground state failed to achieve its aim.

Losses were vast: around 20,000 insurrectionists and 200,000 civilians were killed and 70% of the city destroyed.

**30** **Berling, Zygmunt (1896-1980):** Polish general. From 1914-17 he fought in the Polish Legions, and from 1918 in the Polish Army. In 1939 he was captured by the Soviets. In 1940 he and a group of other Polish officers began to collaborate with the Soviet authorities on projects including the organization of a Polish division within the armed forces of the USSR.

In 1941-42 he was chief of staff of the Fifth Infantry Division of the Polish Army in the USSR. After the army was evacuated, he stayed in the USSR.

In 1943 he co-founded the Union of Polish Patriots. He was the commander of the following units: First Kosciuszko Infantry Division (1943); First Corps of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR (1943-44); the Polish Army in the USSR (1944); and First Army of the Polish Forces (Jul.-Sep. 1944); he was simultaneously Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Forces, and dismissed in 1944. From 1948-53 he was commander of the General Staff Academy in Warsaw, and was subsequently retired. He wrote his memoirs.

**31** **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.

**32** **Volksdeutscher in Poland:** A person who was entered (usually voluntarily, more rarely compulsorily) on a list of people of ethnic German origin during the German occupation was called Volksdeutscher and had various privileges in the occupied territories.

**33** **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.

**34** **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.

**35** **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.

**36** 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.