

# Leon Lifsches

Leon Lifsches

Sopot

Poland

Interviewer: Anna Szyba

Date of interview: March 2006

I meet Mr. Lifsches in his spacious apartment in Sopot where he lives surrounded by books and flowers. Mr. Lifsches is not eager to speak about his family and I get the impression he is actually embarrassed by the fact that his parents were orthodox Jews. Modernity and progress contrast in his story with backwardness, the symbol of which is his “fanatic” father. Mr. Lifsches gets agitated when he starts speaking about his career as a communist, he is proud of having fought in the Battle of Lenino, and of his role in the founding of the Jewish War Veterans Association [1](#).

[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[After the war](#)

[Glossary](#)

## My family background

I was born on 29th December, 1915, in Chrzanow [town 50 km west of Cracow]. I come from a bourgeois family. My mother's name was Aurelia Lifsches, nee Rosenbaum, and she was born in 1876 in Chrzanow. I knew her mother, her surname was Rosenbaum, but I don't remember her first name. She lived in Chrzanow, on Krakowska Street. She used to have a husband, but he died. I know nothing about him; I don't even know his name.

My grandmother was religious, because everyone was religious then, but she was also progressive. She wasn't a fanatic. She lit the candles but I don't think she kept kosher. We often visited her. I spoke with her in Polish and Yiddish, she spoke Polish fluently. She was a housewife. That's all I remember about my grandmother.

My father's parents' name was Lifsches. I don't remember the first names of my paternal grandmother or grandfather, because I didn't know them. They lived and died in Volhynia [region in the east of prewar Poland, today western Ukraine], but I don't know when.

My father, Pinkus, was born in 1877 in Radzillow in Volhynia [small town ca. 100km north-east of Lwow, today Ukraine] and he lived there until his marriage. My parents' marriage wasn't unarranged. All Jewish marriages were arranged then. They got married around 1900, I think, because my eldest brother was born in 1905.

My father was a salesman, a merchant. He sold tea and flour products. There was a store in the basement, he sold there; we helped him on an irregular basis. My mother ran the house; she was, as it was called, 'with her husband.'

I had four brothers and a sister. Michal was born in 1905, Heniek [affectionate for Henryk] in 1906, my sister Hanka [affectionate for Hanna] in 1911, I was born in 1915, Iziek [affectionate for Izajasz] in 1917, and between them there was one more brother who died.

We lived in Chrzanow at 12 Aleja Henryka. It was a four-story building, the landlord's name was Szmajdler; we had a four-person apartment on the third floor. There were four rooms, a kitchen and a balcony. I think I shared a room with my brothers, but I don't really remember. Our whole family of seven lived there.

In the neighborhood there lived relatives named Szott who had six daughters. All those daughters survived [the Holocaust] and [until recently] they lived in Israel. One went with the Maccabi [2](#) to Palestine before the war and stayed there. She was the eldest one, and I met her when I visited Israel ten years ago. Her name is Jozefa Wajnsztok.

Chrzanow was a Jewish town, an artisan town. Seventy percent of the inhabitants were Jews – tailors, shoemakers, etc. There was one famous factory in Chrzanow, Poland's first railway engine manufacturing plant. It was the only factory in Chrzanow, the only such factory in Poland, and the only plant [in Chrzanow] where Jews worked next to Christians.

There was a wooded area in Chrzanow. We often went there. There was a fence [around] the house that we lived in, and beyond the fence was a park. We played there. Our backyard adjoined the park. My friends were mostly Jews.

There was the sports association, Maccabi, which I joined at the age of ten or eleven. We met several times a week to practice, exercise. Besides that, there was also the Sokol sports association [3](#), they did rifleman training, gymnastics, kind of government-affiliated [founded in 1867 in Lwow]. We also went there from time to time, but then they stopped it.

My father was religious but come Saturday, he would invariably fall ill to avoid going to the synagogue. He didn't work on Saturday, he was a fanatic [derisive for 'religious']. There was a synagogue in Chrzanow [4](#), and there were prayer houses. My father went to both. On the high holidays you went to the synagogue, and on the other occasions you went to the prayer house close to home.

My mother wore a wig but she didn't keep kosher. She had progressive views. Before the war, it was like that: in the matchmaker's presence, every woman wore a wig. It was a kind of rule. Whether she was religious or not. And what that woman really thought [about religious laws] was a separate matter. My mother generally didn't go to the synagogue, but she lit the candles [on Friday], made the chulent.

We celebrated Sabbath. We ate dinner together at the table, and that was it, after dinner everyone went where they wanted. My father's method of preventing us from going anywhere on Saturday was to hide one shoe from each of us. But since we knew the trick, we had an extra pair stashed away at the neighbors' and we ran away to the woods.

We didn't go to cheder but we had a melamed, a Jewish teacher. I remember he was a very dull man, so I didn't learn much from him. He didn't teach the Torah, he taught the Yiddish language, not Hebrew but Yiddish. He was such a man that his teaching was really very primitive so we didn't have much respect for him. He came to us when I was nine or ten, I was the only one to be taught [during that time], my brothers were all progressive [that is, dissociated themselves from the Jewish tradition].

I remember the following episode: when I was 13, I was rehearsing for my bar mitzvah, my father kept provoking me unnecessarily, I simply couldn't properly read the text, and he gave me a slap on the face. I got angry and I calmly took off the tefillin, placed them on the table, and it was then, at the age of 13, that I became ungodly. It was a memorable episode that I remember very well.

My sister went to a normal [public] gymnasium, I also attended a normal elementary school. I have only one memory from there: of a teacher named Szeligowski whose teaching method was to smack you on the hands and on the backside, he was really cruel. I think he taught Polish. It was a normal, large elementary school. There were Polish boys, Jewish boys, everyone played together. No antagonisms whatsoever. It was a Jewish town, it couldn't have been otherwise.

With our mother we spoke virtually only Polish at home, and with our father it was basically the same. My father could read Yiddish, he bought the Haint [5](#) and the Morgenshtern [6](#). He completed a normal elementary school back in Volhynia. My mother finished elementary school in Chrzanow.

We usually all spoke Polish. I cannot read Yiddish, cannot write it, I'm only familiar somewhat with the spoken language. I never learned Hebrew. I don't know what language it was you recited the Torah fragments in. You learned all those poems, the [Torah] excerpts, memorized them. I don't remember how the holidays were observed at home.

When we were 13 or 14, there were May Day demonstrations on the 1st of May [worker holiday established by the 2nd International, celebrated since 1890 in the form of street demonstrations, marches, and rallies].

## Growing up

Our house stood near the prison. We heard screams and it turned out it was the guards giving the inmates a beating. By that time, I had already joined the Red Scouts [leftwing scouting organization, 1926-1939]. So we went to demonstrate in front of the prison, the whole group of Jewish and Polish youth. The Red Scouts were affiliated with the KZMP [7](#) [Editor's note: the Red Scouts did not have any direct political affiliations]. It wasn't strictly a Jewish organization. I don't know why I went there. My father had no political views.

We lived in Chrzanow until 1932, and in 1932 our whole family moved to Bielsko [large town, today city, 50 km south of Chrzanow]. Henryk's brother worked in Bielsko, he was a commercial representative for the fruit product company Parol. We lived at 24 Rynek. The landlord was a German. We had a four-room apartment on the second floor, there was a bathroom, a kitchen, everything. I no longer went to school, I was already on my own. I had completed a textile college there.

In Bielsko, I was a member of the Communist Youth Union and, on its orders, an activist for the MOPR [8](#), which was a KPP [9](#) affiliate. Before that, I was a member of the Jewish Worker Cultural and

Educational Association [a.k.a. Sila (Strength), founded 1908]. That was purely Jewish, and then, in Bielsko, I began my political activity in the communist party. Later I linked up with the left-wing movement. Being active on the communist party meant taking part in manifestations, in strikes, the whole political life.

We were divided into three-person cells that met secretly, and the police knew about them only if they had informers inside. There was a division into districts, neighborhoods, and then into cells. The party activity took place on three levels: the cell, the neighborhood, the factory. The cells usually met at the factories. At the time, I worked as a dyer at a textile plant, and that's where I conducted my activity as a communist.

My mother knew I was a communist but my father did not. She was very progressive. She only kept telling us, 'Alright, everything's fine, but just don't get yourself arrested.' We were all very involved, my sister, too.

My brother Michal emigrated to Palestine in 1932. He wasn't a Zionist. He went alone, as a chalutz, and there, in Palestine, he joined the communist party and was active in it. He eventually got arrested and deported and he returned to Chrzanow, I don't remember when, and he remained an active communist.

Heniek got married before the war. His wife's name was Gienia, nee Kizler. A Jewess from Bielsko. She gave birth to a baby girl, in 1939, I guess, but that was already in Lwow. They named her Wiera.

We weren't the upper-income kind of petty bourgeois merchants, not at all. Medium-income, I'd say. We didn't go away for the summer holidays. I don't really remember what we did; in Chrzanow, we had a newsstand, selling newspapers, buns, that sort of thing. Besides that, we frolicked. Wandered around the parks, the squares, got into mischief, as boys do. I never went to Volhynia.

There was also my mother's sister who lived in Chrzanow. Her last name was Klajn, I don't remember her first name. Her husband was a money lender; they had a son. His name was Berek Klajn and during the occupation he was in Auschwitz, after which he found himself in Israel where he had two children and where he died.

His wife, Maryska Klajn, was born in Przemysl and is alive, she lives in Ramat Gan. We keep in touch. She was virtually the only relative we had in Chrzanow. My mother had no other siblings, I think, and I don't know whether my father had any brothers or sisters at all.

In 1937, there was a pogrom in Bielsko [10](#), organized by the Stronnictwo Narodowe [11](#), the endeks, whose local leader was a man named Zajaczek. And we, as the communist party, together with the class-conscious trade unions, dispelled that pogrom. We took several thousand workers out to the street, they started setting houses, businesses on fire, and at the head of that communist party committee stood a woman, Szyfra Goldszlak, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, who spent ten years in prison for her activity. She was arrested in Bielsko. Nobody died in that pogrom.

Financially, we all depended on Henryk who had a business. We weren't strapped for money; I was independent, had a job. We initially lived together, and then Henryk got married and moved out,

but he still lived in Bielsko, it was called Aleja, a Jewish neighborhood, new houses. My sister also had a job; she was a bookkeeper in a very big clothing store. Iziek was a textile worker in a factory, and Michal ran a store for Henryk throughout all that time.

In March 1938 I was arrested and sentenced to 18 months. I still have the original indictment. I did my time together with other communists in a prison in Cieszyn [town 50 km west of Cracow]. During that time, my father died of tuberculosis. I wanted to attend his funeral, but the police said that had to be under escort, and I didn't agree to that. So I didn't attend his funeral, but my father is buried at the Jewish cemetery [in Bielsko].

I was released in June, a few months before the war, and was banned from the town for ten years as an 'undesirable element.' I went to Lodz. There I moved in with my second brother, Iziek, who had also served time in prison and has been banned. Michal was banned too, he moved to the Tarnopol province, lived in Trembowla [ca. 130km east of Lwow, today Ukraine]. He got married there, his wife's name was Buchholz, I don't know her first name.

### **During the war**

We were in Lodz from June to October 1939. From September, we were under German occupation [12](#). We left the city with my brother [Iziek] sometime at the turn of October and November. It was still possible to flee, the Germans allowed families to reunite and issued travel permits. It was in Zgierz [suburb of Lodz], and we took advantage of the opportunity. We were leaving at the last moment, acquaintances had already let us know that the Polish police had made communist activists' files available to the Gestapo.

We went to Warsaw, and from there to Bialystok, and from there to Lwow. The years 1940-1941 we spent in Lwow. Henryk was there, Iziek, me, and Hanka. We all worked with tricot in a textile factory. I worked as a foreman in the dye room, my brother worked as a weaver, and Hanka was a tricot worker. Each of us lived on their own. I lived in Lyczakow [Lwow neighborhood], in a rented apartment.

My mother didn't want to go with us to Lwow, she went to her sister in Chrzanow instead. And there she died, and Hanka also went to Chrzanow during the Lwow period, to be with our mother, and they both died in Kety, near Chrzanow, in a kind of ghetto sub-camp [Editor's note: the town of Kety is located 40 km south-west of Chrzanow, 20 km south of Oswiecim (Auschwitz) 20 km north-east of Bielsko. No information has been found on the existence of any camp or sub-camp in Kety. The likeliest possibility is that it was a permanent outpost for Jewish workers working outside the ghetto].

I lost touch with my mother and sister when I was still in Lwow. At the end of 1941 I learned that they were both dead, acquaintances wrote us from there, non-Jews with whom we indirectly kept in touch.

Before the outbreak of the [German-Soviet] war [13](#), I was enlisted in the Red Army, and Iziek was called up for the so called reserve drill. And there war met us and we didn't return home, becoming, as you call it, front-liners instead. I served on the Ukrainian front and there we were demobilized and sent away - we were to join the Anders' army [14](#). All those who came from Western Ukraine were demobilized with us, as 'unreliable element.' That was early 1942.

We were enlisted in the work battalions, the so called 'stroybats' [Russian stroityelnyy battalion – construction battalion]. They told us we would join the Anders' army and instead we found ourselves in Novosibirsk as stroybat members, building a metallurgical plant at minus 40 degrees Celsius. And there, a group of 200 soldiers, we mutinied and organized a strike.

Among us was Lucjan Szenwald [1909-1944, poet, communist, fought in the Battle of Lenino], I remember, he was a famous writer. We refused to go to work. A district military prosecutor came and, surprisingly, asked us what we wanted, so we said we were professionals and had nothing against working in the stroybats – but in our professions. To our surprise, 24 hours later the military prosecutor personally arrived with some buses and those buses took us to boarding houses where we were given jobs [consistent with our professions]. And that was an episode that could have well ended tragically.

Iziek was still on the front, somewhere near Moscow. And from there, he was also sent to the trudarmia [15](#), to Tashkent. We met many of our friends in Novosibirsk. One was a guy named Sternlicht, from Bielsko, his wife worked in the canteen, gave us some extra food, and it was there I learned that my three brothers, Michal, Henryk, and Iziek, were in Tashkent.

It was 1942. And so, illegally, me and a whole group of people, we hopped on a train carrying Polish soldiers released from camps, and we rode towards the Anders' army, towards Tashkent. Eventually I found myself in a place near Bukhara where they told us to pull our pants down and said, 'about turn!' End of story, they checked whether we were circumcised. By that time, Jews were no longer admitted into the Anders' army [16](#).

Some people went to Fergana, me and some other people went to Tashkent, but my brother Henryk was no longer there, having left with the Anders' army. Michal lived in the Kyrgyz Republic, worked in a kolkhoz [17](#). I got a job in Tashkent as a dyer in a cooperative, Iziek worked in a state textile factory, also in Tashkent. We lived in an Uzbek quarter, called Barkhan, with a Russian lady who had also been evacuated, in very primitive conditions.

We received support from the MOPR Central Committee. There was a large group of Jews in Tashkent at the time, several hundred people. Tashkent had a sizeable Jewish minority in itself, plus there were many of us, the émigrés. We were a large, strong communist group, kind of affiliated with the MOPR Central Committee. The party itself had been banned.

We were in Tashkent until 12th May 1943, after which date we left the city to join the 1st Division [18](#). Me and Iziek fought in the Battle of Lenino, and my brother was killed virtually a couple of steps away from me.

I was the second in command of the regiment's medical company. I personally took part in taking wounded soldiers away from the front line under enemy fire. During one such excursion to the front line I was heavily wounded. I went through several hospitals between October and May, and eventually found myself in a Polish hospital in Moscow, where I underwent the final surgery.

After being released from the hospital, I was sent back to the front, to the headquarters, in Lutsk, Ukraine, and from there I went with the army as an officer, already wounded in battle, with the back units. I took part in the liberation of Lublin [23rd July 1944, the city was Poland's temporary capital for the next 164 days], and then in the liberation of Warsaw [17th January 1945].



Following the liberation of Warsaw, in 1945, I was sent back to Lublin, and directly from there, already released from service, to Silesia, to Katowice, and from Katowice to Bielsko, because the rule was that all officers and professionals were sent to areas they knew to join the reconstruction effort there. I took part in the reconstruction of industry.

### **After the war**

I was a member of the Polish Workers' Party [PPR] [19](#), a party official; I served for some time as secretary for economic matters on the provincial committee in Bielsko. All the time in the textile industry, in the Textile Industry Federation, and in 1952 I was transferred to Warsaw.

I met my wife in 1945. She had also come from Lublin, delegated by the PPR Central Committee. Her name was Zofia Kubik, born in 1919. She wasn't Jewish, but she fought in a partisan unit in the Rzeszow area. She was a dressmaker by profession.

I have two sons. Andrzej was born on 3rd November 1946, and Marek on 12th May 1950. Andrzej has a degree in sociology, lives in Canada, works as a librarian, and the younger one is a kind of electronics engineer. Andrzej's wife is called Malgorzata, nee Kowalska, a Pole. They have two daughters, but kill me if I remember their names.

My other son had many wives and has a son with his second one. He lived in Denmark for a long time, left Poland in the 1970s, fed up with the anti-Semitism. He spent the last five years in Poland and is now going back to Denmark.

My children knew about their roots. Our home was completely non-religious, but they have never disavowed [their Jewishness]. In fact, everyone knew that my son would punch any kid who'd derisively call him a Jew. I've never changed my last name. My younger son opposes anti-Semitism vehemently if he finds himself among people of such views. As far as Jewish matters go, they haven't forgotten their roots.

In Warsaw I worked at the Ministry of Crafts, as the head of the military department, and then in the State Reserves Office, I don't remember since when. I was fired as part of the March story [20](#). People were harassed, fired from their jobs, my son was expelled from Warsaw University. The famous philosopher, Kotarbinski intervened on his behalf. My son was friend with his grandson and after some time he was readmitted to the university. [Tadeusz Marian Kotarbinski (1886-1981): philosopher, logician, ethic, member of the Lwow-Warsaw school of philosophy]

I got a job at a cooperative called Optima. I worked for some two years there as deputy chief executive for sales, but eventually left because the company was utterly corrupt and they wanted me to participate in their swindles, so I called it quits and took early retirement, at the age of 55 - that is in 1970.

In Warsaw I joined the Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews [21](#) and was a co-founder and board member of the Association of Jewish War Veterans. That was in 1987. As a group of social activists, we undertook efforts aimed at setting up an organization of Jewish war veterans. I was initially the head of the veteran department for the Warsaw region, and then, for three terms, a total of 12 years, the chairman of the welfare committee.

As for my brothers, Henryk left Russia with the Anders' army and went with it to Palestine, where he stayed with his wife and daughter. They had one more daughter, but I can't remember her name. My brother died in 1978. I didn't attend his funeral, it wasn't allowed to go to Israel [the Soviet Bloc countries didn't have diplomatic relations with Israel from 1967 to 1989].

Michal returned to Bielsko after the war and emigrated to Israel sometime in the late 1950s. There he had two sons with his second wife. He had no children with his first wife, the Buchholz girl he married back in Lwow, and they got a divorce. She moved to Szczecin after the war, and he married again in Bielsko. With the new wife he went to Israel and he has two sons there.

One has a PhD in economics, his name is Jacob. He lectures at the university. The other one, Janek, works for a branch of the Polish bank PKO, speaks good Polish. I keep in touch with them. The other one speaks Polish less well. Michal died two years ago in Israel. Cousin Berek's wife, Marysia Klajn, who survived in a nunnery, is still alive.

I was in Israel once, as an individual tourist. That was in 1989, I visited my relatives. I never went abroad during the communist period, in 1992 I went to Denmark to see my son.

My first wife had a heart condition and we partly moved out to Sopot [town ca. 15km north of Gdansk], we helped organize the Jewish community there, and there we met [my present] wife who worked as a conservator. She was a family friend and she helped us organize the Jewish community, the Jewish war veterans association in Sopot.

My second wife, Hanna Domanska, is a Pole, born in 1932 in Poznan, who has lived in Sopot since 1946. When my wife died, fifteen years ago, she became my second wife. During the occupation Hania lived in Warsaw and was strongly moved by the Jewish ghetto [22](#) and Ghetto Uprising [23](#) experiences. So it's no accident that she's involved in these matters.

At a time when no one dreamed yet about reviving the Jewish community, Hania was already deeply into it as historical monument conservator, being in charge of care over the Jewish cemeteries. And we started writing together [books about the Gdansk-Sopot-Gdynia Jews]. We have organized a Jewish festival since 1990. And eventually, bit by bit, gradually, I moved out to Sopot.

Due to various misunderstandings we haven't been involved with Jewish matters for two years now. I was tired with all that, in fact, I've had several surgeries so I want to slow down now.

## Glossary

### **[1](#) The Association of Jewish War Veterans and Victims of Prosecutions during World War II (Stowarzyszenie Żydów Kombatantów i Poszkodowanych w II wojnie)**

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



and dialogue.

## **2 Maccabi World Union**

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

## **3 Sokol**

One of the best-known Czech sports organizations. It was founded in 1862 as the first physical educational organization in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Besides regular training of all age groups, units organized sports competitions, colorful gymnastics rallies, cultural events including drama, literature and music, excursions and youth camps. Although its main goal had always been the promotion of national health and sports, Sokol also played a key role in the national resistance to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Nazi occupation and the communist regime. Sokol flourished between the two World Wars; its membership grew to over a million. Important statesmen, including the first two presidents of interwar Czechoslovakia, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Benes, were members of Sokol. Sokol was banned three times: during World War I, during the Nazi occupation and finally by the communists after 1948, but branches of the organization continued to exist abroad. Sokol was restored in 1990.

## **4 Chrzanow synagogue**

there were two synagogues and six private prayer houses in Chrzanow before the war. The older one dated back to 1786; ruined after the war, it was demolished in 1973. The only surviving synagogue, located at 3 Maja Street no. 9, dates back to the 19th century. A ritual bath probably operated alongside it. Converted several times after the war, it currently serves as a covered market.

## **5 Haint**

Literally 'Today,' it was one of the most popular Yiddish dailies published in Poland. It came out in Warsaw from 1908-1939, and had a Zionist orientation addressing a mass of readers. In the 1930s it attained a print run of 45,000 copies.

## **6 Morgenshtern (Yiddish**

morning star): title of a Yiddish-language weekly magazine published in Warsaw in 1921-1922 by the Bund, the Jewish socialist party. Suffered many confiscations, eventually banned altogether by the court for promoting communist ideas. From 1927-1928 a monthly of the same name was

published in Warsaw, with A. K. Frydman as editor-in-chief, a socio-cultural periodical politically in favor of Pilsudski.

## **7 Communist Union of Polish Youth (KZMP)**

Until 1930 the Union of Communist Youth in Poland. Founded in March 1922 as a branch of the Communist Youth International. From the end of 1923 its structure included also the Communist Youth Union of Western Belarus and the Communist Youth Union of Western Ukraine (as autonomous regional organizations). Its activities included politics, culture and education, and sport. In 1936 it initiated the publication of a declaration of the rights of the young generation in Poland (whose postulates included an equal start in life for all, democratic rights, and the guarantee of work, peace and universal education). The salient activists in the organization included B. Berman, A. Kowalski, A. Lampe, A. Lipski. In 1933 the organization had some 15,000 members, many of whom were Jews and peasants. The KZMP was disbanded in 1938.

## **8 MOPR (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionary Fighters)**

Founded in 1922, and based on the decision of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, the organization aimed to protect workers from the terrorist attacks of the Whites and help the victims of terrorism. It offered material, legal and intellectual support to political convicts, political emigrants and their families. By 1932 it had a membership of about 14 million people.

## **9 Communist Party of Poland (KPP)**

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

## **10 Pogrom in Bielsko in 1937**

on 17th November, a Jewish restaurant proprietor, Norman, killed a Polish worker named Wanat. On the same day the mob broke windows in all Jewish stores in the center of Bielsko, before being dispersed by the police. Anti-Jewish riots broke out again on the day of Wanat's funeral.

## **11 National Alliance (Stronnictwo Narodowe, SN)**

Polish political alliance founded in 1928. The SN's program was right-wing and nationalistic; the alliance advocated the creation of a nationalist Catholic state and the hierarchical organization of society, and promulgated slogans demanding the curtailment of Jews' civil liberties and rights (including access to higher education). It was the largest political party in pre-war Poland; in 1938 it had over 200,000 members.

## **12 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.

## **13 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.

## **14 Anders' Army**

The Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, subsequently the Polish Army in the East, known as Anders' Army: an operations unit of the Polish Armed Forces formed pursuant to the Polish-Soviet Pact of 30th July 1941 and the military agreement of 14th July 1941. It comprised Polish citizens who had been deported into the heart of the USSR: soldiers imprisoned in 1939-41 and civilians amnestied in 1941 (some 1.25-1.6m people, including a recruitment base of 100,000-150,000). The commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR was General Wladyslaw Anders. The army never reached its full quota (in February 1942 it numbered 48,000, and in March 1942 around 66,000). In terms of operations it was answerable to the Supreme Command of the Red Army, and in terms of organization and personnel to the Supreme Commander, General Wladyslaw Sikorski and the Polish government in exile. In March-April 1942 part of the Army (with Stalin's consent) was sent to Iran (33,000 soldiers and approx. 10,000 civilians). The final evacuation took place in

August-September 1942 pursuant to Soviet-British agreements concluded in July 1942 (it was the aim of General Anders and the British powers to withdraw Polish forces from the USSR); some 114,000 people, including 25,000 civilians (over 13,000 children) left the Soviet Union. The units that had been evacuated were merged with the Polish Army in the Middle East to form the Polish Army in the East, commanded by Anders.

### **15 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.

### **16 Jews in the Anders Army**

all pre-war Polish citizens were initially allowed to join the army being formed in the Soviet Union by General Wladyslaw Anders. In the initial period (summer-autumn 1941) many Jews joined, accounting for as many as 40 percent of the army's total number by December 1941. On 1st December, however, the Soviet authorities announced that only persons of Polish ethnic origin would from then on be regarded as Polish citizens, whereas Belarussians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Jews would be treated as Soviet citizens and as such not allowed to join. The Polish ambassador submitted a protest note. Following some negotiations, the Soviet Union agreed to recognize Jews from central and western Poland as Polish citizens. The principle, however, was inconsistently applied, with not only the Soviets but also the Polish military multiplying obstacles for Jews wishing to join. The causes, besides nationalistic and anti-Semitic sentiment, included the fact that the number of food rations approved by the Soviets for the Anders army was limited (from December 1941 to 96,000). The dispute flared up when the Anders army decided to evacuate to Iran in the spring of 1942: not all soldiers were allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Ultimately, of the total 77,000 soldiers of the Anders army, only 3,500 Jews made it to Iran. The others were demobilized and left in the Soviet Union. During the Anders army's stay in Palestine, some 3,000 of its Jewish soldiers deserted to join the Jewish military organizations, the Haganah and the Irgun.

### **17 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.

### **18 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.

## **19 Polish Workers' Party (PPR)**

A communist party formed in January 1942 by a merger of Polish communist groups and organizations following the infiltration of an initiative cell from the USSR. The PPR was not formally part of the Communist Internationale, although in fact was subordinate to it. In its program declarations the PPR's slogans included fully armed combat to liberate the country from the German occupation, the restoration of an independent, democratic Polish state with new eastern borders, alliance with the USSR, and moderate socio-economic reform. In 1942 the PPR had a few thousand members, but by 1944 its ranks had swelled to some 20,000. In 1942 it spawned an armed organization, the People's Guard (renamed the People's Army in 1944). After the Red Army invaded Poland the PPR took power and set about creating a political system in which it had the dominant position. The PPR pacified society, terrorized the political opposition and suppressed underground organizations fighting for independence using instruments of organized violence. It was supported by USSR state security organizations operating in Poland (including the NKVD). After its consolidation of power in 1947-48 the leadership of the PPR set about radical political and socio-economic transformations based on Soviet models, including the liquidation of private ownership, the nationalization of the economy (the collectivization of agriculture), and the subordination of all institutions and community organizations to the communist party. In December 1948 the party numbered over a million members. After merging with the Polish Socialist Party it changed its name to the Polish United Workers' Party.

## **20 Anti-Zionist campaign in Poland**

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

(e.g. with respect to people whose spouses were Jewish). Jews were forced to emigrate. From 1968-1971 15,000-30,000 people left Poland. They were stripped of their citizenship and right of return.

## **21 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.

## **22 Warsaw Ghetto**

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

## **23 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (or April Uprising)**

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