Four Days in Atlantis

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This text is an extract from a larger whole in which some passages explore the structure of a Jewish community and its relationship with the surrounding population. The author prefers not to name the town, which is located in western Poland in the former Russian partition, not far from the 1914 border with Germany; he does so as a means of emphasizing its typical character. The complete book was published under the same title, Cztery dni w Atlantydze (Four Days in Atlantis) in 1991 in Uppsala, Sweden.

In the summer of 1947, I took advantage of a leave for the first time in my life. I boarded a train and rode to my hometown, which I had left in November 1939. It was two years after the war had ended.

When I travelled there, I didn’t know whom I would find and I didn’t even think much about this. I didn’t expect to find a single Jew, in the same way that I hadn’t met any in most of the towns into which my military service haphazardly led me. Jews wanted to live in groups, in large cities, where they felt safe. They were right—small towns were still unsafe for them. But in the case of my own town, I was mistaken. Some of the survivors had indeed resettled there; it turned out they felt most at home there. They weren’t murdered. The town turned out to be better than average, even much better. I met Jews, three decimated families and a few solitary castaways, ten people who had survived: out of three thousand.

I entered a different river. Under the Nazis, people had been stifled. The resistance movement had been weak, but terror had reigned wildly. At that time, the expulsion of the Germans was accepted as a liberation. The town was small and not particularly cultivated; it was unlikely that anyone had read [Czesław] Miłosz, but they would have agreed with him that ‘even such a victory is also a victory’ and that ‘it gives birth to hope’ (‘Antygona’, Poezje, vol. 1, Paris 1984). At least some members of the community believed or wanted to believe this. I soon learned that many young people, who had been pushed aside by the interwar stagnation and further marginalized by the five-year war, had started to take advantage of the opportunities opening up to them. The more ambitious made their way to universities, while others were satisfied with military academies.

I wasn’t impressed at first. God, how small everything was here! The train station, which once seemed great and mysterious, was now reduced to a small tidy building; previously spotless, it was now dirty. The road from the station to the town, the route of beautiful Saturday strolls with my father, seemed smaller as well. And even though the whole world had shrunk in my eyes, my town was reduced even more than other parts. I walked, feeling attacked by memories that were overlapping with the reality that was taking shape. Near the station was Ryczke’s sawmill. His wife, the beautiful Janina, used to be my teacher; I had played a few pranks on her.

There was the empty, spacious square on which, as in the past, there stood a huge, high cauldron. Its owner once explained to a young boy how soda and rancid fat could be combined into soap under the influence of heat. A long time ago the place had been a soap factory, a landmark from before World War I that had gone bankrupt back in the twenties; the
cauldron now stood like a monument. It was a monument of who knows what.

I remember well the man who gave me my first chemistry lesson, but I don’t recall his name. Maybe it was Bram—who also traded horses—but does it matter?

There was the small cottage with the attic; on the ground floor, Kleiner the milliner had her workshop; she lived in the attic with her granddaughter Marylka. For a month I had given Marylka lessons, at 50 groszy per hour, three times a week, earning 6 zlotys all told. My fee was less than the better-known tutors had charged, but I was not as good a teacher, and the lessons went particularly badly with Marylka. I couldn’t cope with my rowdy peer. It might be added that she was related to the poet Jerzy Kamil Weintraub. Once I met him, and he gave me a curious look and said something, but I couldn’t utter a word in reply. A real poet! Now the Kleiners were gone, and an abyss had closed over them. Houses still stood, and people lived in them, had been living in them even for some time now, but for me the structures were imponderable, frightening in their novelty.

On the other side of the river stood Doctor Kabata’s four-storey building, the only one with running water and indoor plumbing. On the ground floor had lived old Bajrach, one of the wealthy local citizens. He didn’t run a business but lived from the interest he earned lending his money. The demand for loans was very high, as there was no capital since the banks had been ruined by the war and the inflation of 1923. Those who possessed capital remembered their bad experiences and were wary about giving loans; they demanded mortgages and calculated repayments in dollar value.

Bajrach once invited my father and me for tea and showed us his library. He collected old Hebrew books. He took out folios from his safe and we read their publication dates. To my eyes they were indecipherable marks, and one of the volumes carried a pre-Gutenberg date. If I’m not mistaken, the volume was printed with wood engravings. I was too young to evaluate the collection, but I knew then that I was holding priceless treasures in my hands.

The shut doors of Rachwał’s small pastry shop: above the ground floor had lived Miss Lewicka, a teacher, who moved out before the war. She was Jewish, but she had connections with the Piłsudski people: her brother, a member of Polska Organizacja Wojskowa (Polish Military Organization), was an influential man.

Before the war, every grocery shop had had its own aroma. Cinnamon shops were not just a figment of the literary imagination: they really existed, with their own great and small dramas. It’s just that the aroma of cinnamon was not a general distinction. The wholesale shop on Kaliska Street smelled of cinnamon and other condiments; it was well lit and its goods generally were of high standard. This respected but expensive shop run by the Laurin sisters near the town hall was clean, orderly, and smelled of Protestantism. The nearby Lipszyc shop, long and dark, smelled of flour and something indeterminate, reminiscent of bedding that hadn’t been aired. Often the whole place stank of kerosene. The town had electricity, but it was expensive, 75 groszy per kilowatt hour. At such a price most people still used kerosene lamps to light their homes, while the poorest used acetylene lamps.

A woman we called ‘Bless-you’ had a well-located shop with a good variety of goods, but customers preferred not to buy sugar and flour from her. The smell of herring permeated the store. The whole family smelled of them, including the owner’s grandson, Natek Nomburg, who was in my class at school. Natek was dull and sluggish. I now know that he was suffering from thyroid problems and other sicknesses, but back then we thought he was simply stupid. He was the best possible target for teasing, and Jewish children were no angels. We would form a ring around Natek, someone would pretend to sneeze, and the choir
would shout ‘Bless you’!

In the study of history, Natek turned out to be incredibly smart, smarter than the rest of us. Several days after the Germans came, he went to bed and in broad daylight, without shouting, moaning, or complaint, simply died. Could it be that a merciful God felt that Natek had suffered enough in life and had liberated him from what was about to occur? I would like to believe this, and I would like to believe that I will be forgiven for the scorn that I showed him.

Two months after his death I took to the road from which I was now returning. My grandfather didn’t like me, but he blessed me before I left. He wished for me that I wouldn’t have to go through what I could not bear. Old Jews knew the measure of suffering, which I was about to learn. In the years that followed, I felt that I had experienced more than fate should visit upon just one person. Tormented by hunger and disease, degraded, I clung to that thin thread of life, but I envied Natek. Death without pain and the consciousness of dying. What greater gift can one imagine!

A little further on lived the Iwanowicz family, who owned a textile store. They were Jews from the East, ‘Litvaks’, in the eyes of the Polish Jews: people without principles, a carry-over of the Polish–Russian conflict. Years later in Israel I found out that Polish Jews don’t like Czech or Russian Jews, but get along fine with Hungarian ones, because Poles and Hungarians think they are like brothers. Russian Jews were disliked; it was thought that they kowtowed too much. Probably it was a matter of the experience of generations, for Russian conditions necessitated more servility than Polish Jews were used to. But Polish Jews also fawned. That is why they flinched at the servility of the Russians, in whom they saw a caricature of themselves. Mr Ring, father’s good friend who had an office in nearby Kleczew for writing requests and applications, and who had a small law practice from which he would give legal advice to the poor, would endlessly repeat the story of Abraham’s wives, Sarah and Hagar, and of their sons, Isaac and Ishmael—how one of them became a Jew, the other an Arab. The moral according to Ring was: Be a Jew or be a goy, but don’t be a Litvak! Litvaks got his goat.

On national holidays, Iwanowicz would don a four-cornered blue army cap—he had returned to Poland as a soldier in Haller’s army. Everyone knew that Haller didn’t accept Jews in his army, and that on their return to Poland, his soldiers committed pogroms, often bloody ones. I once asked Iwanowicz how he came to join it. He sneered without saying anything. I think the induction officer mistook his name for a Russian one, and Haller didn’t mind Russians, entrusting officers from there with good positions. And, as usual, ‘Jews got in everywhere’, getting involved in battles for Polish independence, even with Haller.

After the Germans came, Iwanowicz put on a different cap and became a German policeman. How long he remained one I have no idea, as we escaped before he had a chance to play his role. Probably he remained a policeman for a short while, up until the deportations. I was informed that he hadn’t survived the occupation. One of his sons did; I’m not sure if it was Beniek or Dawidek, and he left Poland right after liberation. No one in town knew where he had gone.

Jews are talented. Everyone knows the typical Jewish child is a ‘genius’: Jewish and Polish jokes agree on this point. But I recall Natek as part of the dull, slow learners. In school, every year there was one child who didn’t understand what was being said to him. This wasn’t because Polish was being spoken; no, he or she didn’t understand any language. When called upon, he or she stood up and couldn’t come up with a response. To this very day
I have before my eyes the picture of such unfortunate souls from my early school years. They remained in the first or second forms, as only select children made it to the higher grades.

And it was because of such an unfortunate that more than fifty years ago I started on the thorny path of teaching. I earned the right to be called ‘teacher’. I was twelve when I was asked to be a tutor. My student was Benya, also aged twelve, who was the grandson of a poultry dealer. Benya couldn’t read yet and was still in first grade. I sat with him day after day and stubbornly repeated the simplest letter combinations. I didn’t know much about teaching, but I did what I could. Perhaps this was for the best, because after two months, Benya’s face, which up to that point had been characterized by indifference, suddenly burst into a smile of comprehension. Benya even began to like studying and reading the more complicated pages of the primer. Babel’s Benya Kryk was tested on Tatarkowski; I was tested on Benya, the grandson of a poultry dealer.

One Benya perished, shattered by the Cheka in Odessa, and the other died who knows where, starved to death, or gassed in Auschwitz. For Jews the stations of torment were many. Learning to read ended up pointless.

It had never really occurred to me, before the war, how very Jewish the shops were in my town. I knew this in theory, but it didn’t sink in. I took things and events just as they were, as the natural and sensible order of affairs.

Jews sold textiles, table and kitchenware, ironware, leather. Non-Jewish merchants were the exception. Mr Rybczyński, a nobleman and hunter, but also a regular merchant, had a store that sold paint and guns, while the Fruziński brothers monopolized footwear. Poles operated excise shops, selling alcohol and cigarettes. Similarly, the better grocery stores, called colonial stores, were non-Jewish. Likewise sausage-makers, but these establishments usually belonged to Lutherans—in other words, Germans. By contrast, of the dozen or more textile stores or market stalls, only two were Polish-run, having been established a few years before the war in order to ‘de-Jewify’ trade. The owners of the new stores lived well, obviously in the manner of Poznań whence they came. They had exclusive delivery rights to the authorities, schools, and priests—I don’t recall a member of the Catholic clergy stopping at a Jewish store. But ordinary shoppers were inclined to stick to reliable sources with lower prices who were less parasitic; the buyers couldn’t afford to incorporate ideology into everyday practice.

In order to suppress Jewish trade, nationalists resorted to extra-economic tactics. An official of the Obóz Wielkiej Polski (Camp for a Greater Poland), later of the Stronnictwo Narodowe (National Party), named Szurgot, stood on the street for hours noting down who shopped at Jewish stores. His appearance caused panic among the shoppers and fear among the storekeepers. Moreover, Szurgot forced upon people the journal Orędownik, the Polish equivalent of the German Der Stürmer. Orędownik was a periodical inciting pogroms, addressed to a readership in favour of them. Due to the efforts of Szurgot, the paper enjoyed great popularity. Historians often don’t mention the periodical, and someone should remind them of it—which is what I’m doing.

Economic boycott was a form of Jew-baiting (żydożerstwo) that was only partially effective. There were also other forms of discrimination. A Jew couldn’t become either a state or municipal official, with the exception of two Jewish teachers. I couldn’t imagine it otherwise: the state was young but the principle was well established.

Much was done to make Jews feel their inferiority. A popular form of entertainment was setting dogs on Jews. A dog bit me when I was barely a year old. I don’t remember the
event, but a fear of dogs that I had to cope with as an adult remained with me.
Readiness to beat up Jews was proportionate to piety; evidently, bullying was a Catholic
religious duty. When carollers walked about town, or during the Feast of Corpus Christi, no
Jew dared to show himself. The same held true on Good Friday, or even on Sunday during
High Mass.
I’m not sure if it wasn’t in the year Hitler came to power—1933, or just a little later,
when the non-aggression pact was signed with Germany—that things became worse. The
nationalists were the first to feel the temper of the times. Antisemitism, previously present
only in limited form in the Sanacja camp, now came to the fore. In 1938, I came across a
couple of numbers of Merkuriusz Polski Ordynaryjny. This journal was published by a group
of Sanacja activists, from the ‘fourth brigade’, who during the occupation had crossed over to
the Catholic Union and finally to the Christian Democrats. Jerzy Braun was fascinated by the
Nibelung nature of Hitler and dreamed of bringing German ideas to Poland, which he wanted
to establish on the basis of the Church’s teachings. Braun demanded that Jews be settled in
strict ghettos, and wanted to take away their right to an education, to practise free and unfree
professions, to participate in industry, trade, and crafts. He likewise wanted to forbid their
conversion to Christianity. Braun went further than the edicts of Nuremberg. I remember how
the situation depressed me. What awaits us, what awaits me in a world run by Brauns?
In Poland it wasn’t as bad as Braun would have wished it to be. The average Pole was
better than the ‘mouths shouting for the people’; their shouts, I know as a historian,
were a hysterical reaction to the watering down of ideology once it reached the streets. Even then,
Poland differed from the neighbouring states. There they treated ideology seriously.
Kramowa Street was the busiest street in town. It was short and crammed with houses.
Before the war, the hustle and bustle on Kramowa would cease only after the stores had
closed, or on Friday evening, when a Sabbath calm set in. Now, in 1947, some of the stores
had been converted into homes. The remaining ones had different names on the signs, and
only in their worn-out furnishings were they reminiscent of what they had been under their
former owners. There weren’t many items in the stores, and the bustle had died down. Its
name wasn’t Kramowa Street any longer; it was Słodki Street.
Słodki (‘Sweet’) Street was not sweet. In September of 1939, right after entering the
town, the Germans had shot two hostages: a Pole, Kurowski, the owner of a restaurant; and a
Jew, namely Słodki. Now both had streets named for them.
Słodki had owned an odds-and-ends shop, actually on Third of May Street, but the
neighbouring street was designated as his territory. His store had been quite narrow and was
located in a run-down tenement. There he sold accessory textiles, cotton fabrics, elastics,
buttons and cheap lingerie. He was a good businessman who did well, but he was the type of
merchant who never gave credit, and was thought to be without scruples. That opinion was
well founded. In 1933 my father, in a moment of weakness, entrusted Słodki with a hundred
zlotys that Słodki was supposed to return in half an hour. He didn’t return it, and the serious
loss led to my father’s bankruptcy. Now the town honoured the memory of Słodki, a man
whom the Jews had despised.
Why was a street in a Polish town was named for a Jew? I was told that renaming the
street was a spontaneous act that had occurred right after the Germans were driven out, and
had not come as an order from higher authorities. I suppose that this was the consensus of the
folks I was talking to, who were good people. For me, it was a sign, a symbol, that this was
my country. It’s a good thing to know that when no Jews remain, their traces will be
commemorated for future generations in the form of an unknown Jew. Forever and ever…

I felt a little odd thinking of this particular Słodki. But my Lord, what did his petty nastiness mean when compared to Hitler’s lawlessness? Was it not perhaps even better that the best Jewish mediocrity was commemorated? Great people have no lack of epitaphs from their descendants. And after all, where could we find a great person here? There were those who were better or worse, but no one here who would go down in history for his or her achievements.

I was asked about Słodki. It turns out that no one knew him; no one from the town had frequented the small shops that served the country folk. I answered that, yes, there had been such a hasid, who had a small shop and three daughters. I didn’t mention anyone’s bad experiences. Słodki thus became a personality for the town, and they were proud that they had chosen well.

In 1961 I visited the town for the last time. There was no longer a Słodki Street, and Kurowski Street was gone as well. Evidently, the names were bothersome. I don’t even know whose name bothered whom. Perhaps the idea was to take away people’s memory?

In this town of 10,000, Jews had constituted a third of the population, as they did in Warsaw, Plock, Łódź, or medium-sized towns. This portion of the population disappeared. In my town very few survived, and no matter how I count, they didn’t add up to 5 or even 3 percent.

Fate saved the Polish population, but even so, the Germans killed its members without rhyme or reason. On 10 November 1939 they conducted their first major slaughter, for no particular reason. Our neighbour, an elderly man, was shot for possessing an official’s spade from before World War I. The beautiful and foolish Irka Dziubczynska was killed because she rebuffed a German who was trying to pick her up. Those who were shot met a fate that can be considered fortunate in comparison with that of those who perished in the camps, whose agony was extended in time and topped with humiliation.

Why do I write this? One wants to believe that after such massacres, constant brushes with death, and ultimate matters, those who survived would be stamped with determination, as in literature, and as in the theatre. Yet I came and saw that somehow people were living mundane lives. Or they pretended to. They ate, slept, bore children, furnished homes, looked for jobs and careers, schemed against each other, and were pleased with trifles. The laws of literature obviously didn’t pertain to them.

I didn’t and couldn’t hold anything against them for this. I, too, wanted to live like a human again. However, I remember I drank more than I would have wanted to throughout my stay. It wasn’t only that the walls reminded me of the dead, but I felt that I was walking on their corpses, that I was sleeping on them, that the whole town was permeated with them, down to the minute details. Why did people not see this? What were the feelings of those who had taken possession of Jewish furniture, who use their dishes, who have taken over their homes? I didn’t ask; I couldn’t bring myself to do it, and no one talked about it. I rolled along psychologically, and even without alcohol I would have been drunk.

On the one hand, horror exuded from every corner, and there were cursed spirits in post-Jewish wardrobes and beds, and from the horror of the crimes. On the other hand—people lived a quotidian existence, and I have no idea to what extent that was pretence and to what extent real.

On the one hand, miserable numbness and the half-remembered, dull, rhythmic words
of a prayer for the dead pursued me: *yisgadal veyiskadash*. . . On the other hand, I heard ‘How’re you doing?’ and ‘To your health!’

One didn’t want to—couldn’t come to terms with the other. My head spun; I didn’t know where or who I was.

Gryboń was the director of the school for Jewish children. He had called us *kikes*, and was especially mean to the poorer, frightened children. Before the war Gryboń had been the head of the *Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem* (Non-Party Block for Cooperation with the Government) and the *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego* (Camp of National Unity), but after the war he joined the *Polska Partia Robotnicza* (Polish Workers Party). He was a member of the district executive and was appointed school inspector. ‘For heaven’s sake, what a change of career!’ ‘No kidding’, said Janek, once a poor, starving communist, but now boosted to the heights of the town’s powers that be. ‘Such are the members of my council; this is what the authorities look like! And Gryboń isn’t the worst by far!’

I walked uptown, in the direction of the Leszczyński’s store, a warehouse for iron that had represented the apex of Jewish wealth; they had owned a telephone and even a typewriter. Up until the war I hadn’t seen more than five telephones and two typewriters, which I viewed from a respectable distance.

I passed the pseudo-Gothic Protestant church, and I passed old cottages, planted in the ground, mementos of better times. It’s strange, although public buildings—offices, schools, the train station—were in poor condition, the private town was in better shape. It had always been well kept, but now it seemed even to have improved. To a large extent this was to the credit of the occupier, who had demolished the worst slums of Jewish poverty. Among others that had been destroyed was the one in which the woman poultry-trader had lived, whose grandson I tutored; now I think I remember that her name was Pesia, but I’m not sure. I still can’t recall her surname. The neighbouring shack, belonging to Hiller the junk dealer, was also demolished. Not many places were razed—perhaps twenty—but with them the main eyesores were gone.

Fewer people were left, housing conditions had improved, and there was half as much additional living space per capita—an essential change, a side effect of the Holocaust and the murder of a significant number of Poles. Trade was bad, but it didn’t overflow from the confines of the stores.

I went to the Jewish cemetery. The Germans had demolished it, and fragments of shattered tombstones and even more shattered human bones lay here and there in the sand. So this was all that was left of six centuries of Jewish settlement, from dozens of generations, from the repetitive cycles of conception, birth, and death? The cycle was disrupted, and would never be renewed. It was the end.

On the edge was a small sign announcing the erection of a monument commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. In 1961 there was no monument, sign, or even a trace of the cemetery. The evened-out terrain, covered in moss, served as a sports’ field. One more trace of my brethren removed. Who removed it and why?

I stopped at the cemetery and pondered upon those dearest to me: on my father and mother, thrown into a nameless pit in Shafrikan, deep in Asia, far off, near Bukhara. My parents desperately wanted to be where Poland was—and there was a piece of it in the Anders’ Army. Unfortunately, the army didn’t see them as Poles. They paid for this with their lives.
I remembered funerals in which I had participated. I hadn’t gone to many, as my parents, in accordance with a middle-class mentality, had attempted to keep children away from death. I thought the war had accustomed me to it, and that in coming to the cemetery I was fulfilling a symbolic need. The Holocaust took place beyond the town; the cemetery existed before the ovens. But I didn’t know myself very well. When I left, my legs buckled beneath me. I controlled myself: I was to perform the role of the tough one, and roles inspire one.

My view of Germans was rather stereotypical, influenced by the Nazi attitude toward me, a natural reaction for a young Jew. I felt that Germans were a unified, fascist mass of undistinguished faces. I was certain that they were all corroded by Nazism. After all, why shouldn’t they have been?

My short stay under German occupation confirmed my prejudices, as the local Germans behaved terribly. In 1947 I was reminded several times of the owner of a local pub on Kaliska Street; I think his name was Janc. Threatened before the war with imprisonment—he was an ostentatious Nazi, with fighting squads gathered at his place—he sought shelter at his neighbours, the Weingartens. Right after his own entered the town, he took over the Weingartens’ store, their wares, and home. For the citizens, Janc was a symbolic figure, the reverse of Słodki.

The truth was more complicated. My memory retains a strange event. Our client, Janc’s cousin, who ran a haberdasher’s shop somewhere in the Poznań voivodship, came to our town in October 1939 and dropped in to see us. Despite our long faces, our guest made himself at home. He told us how he had been arrested by the Polish police the moment the war broke out and was confined by the military, and that he expected to be shot at any time. We didn’t respond. Our guest didn’t come to complain about Poles; however, he was upset by the Germans. We didn’t say anything in response, as we were afraid it might be a provocation. The sad guest said goodbye and left. I think of him sometimes. I don’t remember his surname or where he came from, perhaps Mogilno. Or maybe Oborniki.

The Germans attracted scum who felt at home with them. Trzaskowa the janitor, hideous Trzaskowa, found lovers who paid her. She surprised the town’s residents, as very little about her would have foretold her career. Evidently she couldn’t count on Polish clients. Her fourteen-year-old daughter Andzia was also successful. Without anyone asking, she remarked that the Germans called her a ‘fine little whore’. The occupation brought out the worst in people. (I also asked about them. They no longer lived there, as they had left with the Germans, probably for the western territories. Obviously they had something else on their consciences other than the fact that they gave their bodies.

Worse than the local Germans were those who came to town. They had power. From each of them one could expect evil: round-ups, beatings, humiliation, robbery. They were a mean, uniform, undistinguishable mass.

From a greenish-brown mass, three bright faces emerge. Oberzahlmeister (Captain) Laub. He came to order a quilt for himself. He surprised us by offering us his hand in greeting. This gesture was usual in a shop and was a demonstration. Offering a Jew your hand was forbidden, so it was clear that he did not want to be identified with the average German.

Slowly Laub became a frequent guest. He warned us that we had to run away to the Soviet side since we would be done away with here. On occasion his orderly came, though his last name escapes me. He behaved much the same as Laub, and it seemed as if they were in on it together. That’s two faces.
A third face belonged to Schultz, an official of the Arbeitsamt, who was a Social Democrat from Berlin. Right from the start he befriended a number of Jews. He didn’t hide his repulsion for Nazism, but helped people whenever he could. After witnessing the deportations in Kalisz, he came to us in tears. When we were fleeing he bought us tickets to Warsaw—Jews and Poles were not sold tickets in those days.

Someone will say that there was nothing extraordinary about these people, that they were simply decent. This is untrue, as resistance to a fanatical collective takes courage. In such times to be human required nerve.

For perhaps a dozen times I was forced to listen to the extraordinary war adventures about Dancygier. Even if I said that I had already heard a story, or that I didn’t know who Dancygier was, I still had to listen. Evidently those adventures had a special meaning for my interlocutors and they wanted the world to understand and appreciate them.

Dancygier had been hidden by a woman who worked as a dancing partner at a local establishment, called Polonia before the war. The place became nur für Deutsche during the occupation. She hid him and saved him. During those years Dancygier did not so much as stick his foot out of her cramped apartment, and when she had visitors, including German officers and gendarmes—you know, a dancing partner—he lay hidden in the casing under the bed. He left his hiding spot at the time of liberation, married her, and took on the name Gdańsk, which was a calque of Dancygier, and became a director of a dance band in the capital of the voivodship.

I couldn’t recall him, although I knew nearly all the Jews in town. There was a Beniek Dancygier, a ruffian, who didn’t have the talent to direct an orchestra, nor even a dance band or a band for a restaurant. I remember that my answer disappointed the people I was talking to, who suspected that for some reason I didn’t want to believe their story. My acquaintances wanted to take me to see the apartment in which the dance partner saved her Jewish lover. I didn’t go, though I knew the house and apartment from before the war, at 26 Wodna Street, above the ground floor. My early childhood had been spent at 28 Wodna Street. But I really didn’t know Dancygier. Perhaps I could place him if someone told me where he had lived earlier, but no one could actually give me this information.

In spite of this, years passed and I would receive greetings from Gdańsk, who knew and remembered me, was happy to hear about me, and was inquiring about news. And when I asked about him in 1961, it turned out he was no longer alive. He died of diabetes and his liver had been ravaged from alcohol. It was no longer important to identify him. Although not entirely: one sleepless night, when I was already in Sweden, a young hasid stood before my eyes, who, like myself had been learning to play the violin at Mr. Gabrielowicz’s, the director of the fireman’s band, and was—so it was reported—a Ukrainian. He was a hasid who stopped being one, who cut off his peyes, and shortened his gabardine that looked rather like an overcoat. On Saturdays, however, he continued to go to a hasidic prayer house.

He was ten years older than me and wasn’t a friend at all. I bumped into him once or twice at Gabrielowicz’s. His father used to have a small store, with iron pots and faïence dishes. Peasants would shop there. I came to the store maybe once, though I can’t recall why. His father was a simple hasid who justified any deviation from tradition for commercial reasons so that peasants wouldn’t be discouraged from dealing with him.

I knew him; of course I knew him, but I didn’t remember him earlier. After all, we sold my violin to him when I was ten and it was clear that I had no talent. That’s right, he
came to our place and tried out the violin, and he liked it. But that gabardine—even shortened and no longer black—didn’t suit a dance partner and a band in a voivodship capital. Evidently some personality quite different from the surface one had been submerged in Gdański, along with some artistic sensibility that eventually found an outlet in a popular dance-house. When I finally identified who this deceased Dancygier was, even the romance with the dancing partner seemed to be almost familiar to me. Did someone tell me about it, or did I see it myself?

And there is much that we would have had to tell each other, the pupils of Mr Gabrielowicz, players in the air, each of us in our own way breaking away from the synagogue. But we won’t tell each other, since how can we? Blast it!

I wrote that the story was close to pulp fiction, and aren’t these words an offering to a stereotype? A dancing partner, a person close to the dregs of society exhibits the highest humanity. She does this when others, the honoured and noble, fail, are diminished, don’t stand up to the occasion. The one who made a living from pretence gave evidence that she was capable of the greatest love, of risking the most. In military operations, acts of bravery are generally singular and often spontaneous. She endured, that dancing partner, not for a moment or a day, but for nearly six years, a merciless period of time for many good marriages, even without experiencing any particularly harsh trials. Which love stands the test of time...? The dancing partner endured. And Gdański endured. Not only throughout the war years, but also for a dozen or so post-war years. All that remains is for me to tip my hat to them. The people of the town had a right to be proud of them and it is to their credit that each of them, unasked, repeatedly told their story ad nauseum. . . .

The flat construction of the town held a complex pyramid of social relations. The stores of Iwanowicz, the Leszczyński, Krauze, Bużka, grandpa, Ryczke’s sawmill, and Kowalski’s mills all constituted the town’s and the Jews’ façade of wealth. They were the higher class of the Jewish townspeople. Beneath the upper crust was hidden a less wealthy but nonetheless well-off middle class. At its upper level were the owners of smaller but prosperous stores, landlords, bakers. At a lower level were those who owned smaller stores but because of some crisis, sickness, or lack of enterprising spirit did not do so well. The stores looked similar, but the differences were significant. The Kawas, at whose place we did most of our shopping, were prosperous, and their son came back to town as a doctor. On the other side of the street, Korn’s small store was failing, and Mr Korn constantly read the newspaper and followed the successes of an American politician of the same name. He was certain that it was his brother who had escaped induction into the Russian army. His brother was shifty and could even have become an American politician.

Some lived from pensions, or even on relief sent by rich relatives. Above Korn lived Puacz, a pleasant fellow whose sister had the extraordinary fortune to marry the billionaire McCormick. I don’t know how much of that wealth made its way to her brother, as he lived modestly enough; it can be surmised, though, that the upper floor generated a constant inspiration for Korn in his reflections on the fate of his rascal brother. . . .

A third class, lower than that of the shopkeepers, were the tradesmen. In Jewish society they still constituted a privileged level. They were governed by guild laws—you could only become a master or an apprentice with the permission of the guild while a lessar qualification was a trade licence that did not give the right to qualify apprentices or journeymen. Even these were unobtainable by Jews. Polish masters didn’t allow Jews in their
Guilds; only where Jewish masters had a voice in the guilds could Jewish apprentices and journeymen find a place. However, there was a Jewish harness maker, boot maker, pastry baker, tinsmith, wood lathe operator, watch repairman, locksmith and house painter in town, who had earned their licences at the time of the Russian partition. A sign of stagnation was the lack of a butcher; sausages were expensive and didn’t attract buyers.

Jewish youth wanted to get away, and were attracted to industry and crafts. But they weren’t allowed in those fields, so concentration in the retail sector was a result of the closed gates of the ghetto. What was striking was not only the absence of smiths or carpenters but also the use of medieval technology. The industrial revolution of the previous century had not really had an influence. A Singer sewing machine operated by foot pedal was a major investment that not everyone could afford, even if it was needed.

For craftsmen, there were some variations. If tailors had a bit of capital and their own materials, they did well enough, but Kleczewski the tinsmith, hammering away from morning to nightfall, or Firstenberg the locksmith, fixing locks or making keys and soldering pots, barely eked out a living.

Those who were not permitted to practise a craft or who didn’t own a store managed in any way they could. Their lives depended on their finding a niche for themselves, on their inventiveness. Heniek Beatus’s father sold lottery tickets; his business was called sub-collecting. The lottery office belonged to Mrs Skarbek. But from ticket sales, the Beatus family still could only afford the pepper for their fish. How did they get by? I visited them from time to time and I know how. In the corner stood a manual winder, winding threads from great spools onto little cardboard sleeves, which were sold in stores and fairs. In the entry room was a stove. From time to time Heniek would light it and would pour a bag of barley on the burning cover, slowly cooking a delicious barley coffee.

Rachwalski soaked herrings and smoked them; his aromatic products were sold in stores while they were still warm. Moreover, he dissolved caustic soda and when it hardened he called it crystalline soda and sold it. Miss Leben sold candies and chocolates door to door, while her brother negotiated bills of exchange.

People survived by dealing in those small businesses that lacked appeal for large producers or major retailers. Opportunities arose from being on the spot and being satisfied with a paltry profit, and also because very little money needed to be invested. The tax officers either didn’t know about these deals or pretended not to know. Bribery was an important way of making life easier. The lack of business was striking: people generally had nothing to do and occupied themselves by cleaning the sidewalks.

Even lower on the social scale were members of the fourth class—those who worked in the markets. They weren’t lazy; no, they worked hard for their living. On foot with loaded carts, staying in groups to defend themselves against robbers, they wandered from Słupca to Klecze, from Klecze to Zagórow, from there to Skulsk, at night, in the blazing sun, during rain or snowstorms, to convince rural customers they needed drill pants, almost elegant cordorouy suits, visor caps, pots, and dry goods. Stalls were the envy of others, but market workers only managed to subsist because few were interested in such a severe way of life. Only the lack of an alternative kept the stall keepers in their daily travels. They persisted as long as their health and strength permitted.

Lower still were the poor, the fifth class. They consisted of cottage workers sewing shirts or pants at 30 groszy a pair, which were sold at markets; traders who were no longer fit; milk and bread deliverers; porters who had nothing to transport. And there was also a horde
of people who lived with no visible source of income: I didn’t notice any, and probably they couldn’t find work at all. I lived in poverty myself, with my pants in terrible condition. There was no hope for the future, and tomorrow seemed to have nothing to offer, but I hadn’t yet experienced hunger. Others did.

In September 1944, deep in Middle Asia at the Chilkowo station, the construction project at the Farchad hydro power plant over Syr-Daria proceeded. That day I was going to the army. No one was forcing me. Quite the contrary: for three years I had been trying to get a Polish uniform and face the dangers of military action. I found success at last, and now I was waiting for the train that would take me through half of Russia to Lublin. Unexpectedly, from the direction of the railway workshops came a familiar melody that was humming in rhythm with the hammering of a tinsmith. The voice, too, seemed familiar. I approached the workshop. It was no mistake—a friend from my class at elementary school was singing. Five thousand kilometres away from our hometown, I found ‘Chemie’—Chaim Wanne. His parents were defenceless, meek and humble in the face of a rotten fate, ready to undertake any work. They were at the bottom, part of those whose source of income couldn’t be described because it didn’t exist.

The train to Lublin wouldn’t arrive for a few hours. Chemie wiped his sweaty hands and we left the shop, stopped in the shade nearby, and started to talk in a boisterous way. I learned that after the Germans had come, Chemie and a few friends had escaped to the Soviet side, where they swore solidarity and formed a kibbutz. His friends died one after the other, from tuberculosis, dysentery, or typhoid fever, all experiencing hunger. Chemie was left alone.

‘How did you manage to survive?’
‘Me? I never had it so good before the war. I never ate so fully as now! Eight hundred grams of bread, soup twice a day: when and where did I have it so good?’

Chemie stressed those words. He uttered them with a hateful look, and the friendliness and joy from our meeting evaporated. I understood that while during recess I would eat bread and butter, and sometimes also a roll, Chemie was feeling pangs of hunger and probably hatred toward those who weren’t experiencing it. My conscience started bothering me. I looked like Job; even though I was a candidate to be a soldier, I remained on my feet through sheer willpower. But I had no excuse. It’s true, preoccupied with my own poverty I had been insensitive to that of others. If people live, it’s obvious they have resources. I realized Chemie was no exception. In the five years that we had gone to school together I had rarely exchanged any words with Wanne, and later I had lost sight of him, though he worked at Mr Kleczewski’s in the neighbourhood. And what he said was true.

Under the pretext of having something to take care of, I said goodbye and wandered off in the direction of town. I never saw him again and have no idea if he stayed in Russia, or left for Israel, America, or if he survived the war at all and awaited repatriation. The misery that he experienced sticks in me like a thorn; the misery of a youth who never ate in his life the way he had in the hunger of the USSR.

A memory sticks like a thistle to another one. Wanne joined Natek, his grandmother ‘Bless you’, at their grocery store. I don’t know if many people realise one more phenomenon: the function that herring once had, as food for the poor, as a symbol of poverty. ‘Eight of us there were, herrings we sold, one of us dies, seven remain’, goes an old Jewish
hit or folk song; Jewish hits were songs on the border of folklore; even if they weren’t created by folk artists, they were addressed to the folk, and the folk accepted them without questioning who wrote the words or composed the melodies. This one had Polish words, but it was a Jewish song, probably already forgotten.

A pre-Holocaust Polish term is the word śledziara, an enigmatic word of multiple meanings, signifying a Jewish woman or someone reminiscent of her type selling poor wares, smelly, loud, unkempt, an ‘ideal’ picture. In the course of time the herring gained in status, taking on a diminutive form, but the concept of śledziara remains. The herring was the equivalent of Jewish ham. Sometimes we couldn’t afford a whole herring, so we would buy a slice for 5 groszy at Mazurowa’s tea shop. When we were better off, though, we didn’t buy herring, probably because it reminded us of poverty.

The century-long presence of Russia dissipated without a trace. It had no influence on language, architecture, or customs. Negation remained: memories of arbitrary rule, corruption, drunkenness.

The only trace was the sense that the past was better off, but even this was connected with the passage of time and not with Russia, which was not to be credited with what it deserved. I think, as one could deduce from the stories, the town profited from its close proximity to the border. I don’t know what was smuggled—in my time it was German lighters and spare flints—but my town didn’t earn much through this, and the smuggling business moved along with the border.

Smuggling probably supplied supplementary incomes, a sort of differential annuity for the town. Basic welfare came from the huge, practically limitless Russian market. The Russian revolution and Polish independence took away the market and devastated the town. Wójciki’s and Lewandowski’s three-storey furniture factory operated at a fraction of its capacity as did the factories of Zaremba, Rajmond, and Skarbek. They all made a pathetic impression.

There was never much industry, but in independent Poland things became worse. Some plants shut down. The town was going through a bad experience: decapitalisation. There was some substance to Rosa Luxemburg’s view that independence was impossible from an economic point of view. One class gained from independence: the intelligentsia, which entered the bureaucracy and took over schooling. After the Russians were expelled, a high school was established in town; after Poland gained independence, three elementary schools were opened. School buildings were constructed, and they were quite modern for the times.

People complained. I grew up during the years of a deep depression. But neither the Poles nor the Jews missed the Russians. The Polish attitude requires no explanation, but the Jewish one does. The Polish administration wasn’t ideal, but it was a marked improvement over the Russian one. Independence gave even citizens without full rights something: it gave them the right to create associations and develop as a society. During the first years of independence, a positivist fever was dominant among the Jews. However, this enthusiasm waned year by year, to be replaced by apathy and a longing for a miracle. The miracle never came: Hitler did.

Heniek belonged to the local elite, as his father was a prominent police officer. Already as a thirteen-year-old boy, Heniek knew he would become a professional officer like
his older brother. He got good marks at school and was strong and handsome. We understood that Heniek would succeed in his plans. But we didn’t take history into account.

I met Heniek in the street. He used to look at me from a high horse, but now we were equals. He had resigned from the army. I asked about his father. ‘You don’t know? The Germans murdered him.’ During the occupation Heniek had worked as a locksmith in a factory, repairing threshing machines. Now he’s its director. He’s expanding the plant, they’re going to be making new machines. He’s going to work now. Twenty-five-years old, but he had the heavy step of a manager.

We walked from the home that Heniek was born in and where he still lived. To one side was Wojciechowski’s carpentry workshop; he had done business with father. Now someone else directed the workshop. And Wojciechowski himself? ‘No one told you? He had been a German policeman and got a death sentence.’ We walked beside the barber’s shop, once the best in town; it had belonged to Wawrznika. He met the same fate.

I felt strange, I had known Wawrznika well enough, and nothing could have predicted his later course. Yes, Wawrznika had married Miss Thiel, and she was a German. But her sister was the lover of the young Leszczyński, and that was a great love. Love? Wawrznika, together with the sisters, tried to destroy the Leszczyński. It was a terrible sight—please don’t ask me to tell you about it. Heniek was a neighbour; he saw it.

‘What happened to officer Pachciarz, your father’s assistant? He joined the Germans at once; I saw it myself.’

‘Yes’, Heniek frowned. ‘He was a bastard, he did their dirty work, and it was probably he who shot my father. He got it in the head. Just like Trenkler, you know, from the restaurant on the market square. He was a German spy.’

Before the war the officers from the local garrison would meet at Trenkler’s. Once I saw six generals leaving the establishment on shaky legs.

Heniek was telling me about a side of the occupation that I didn’t know and about which little was said. ‘And who else was sentenced?’ ‘Well, do you remember Podhorecki, who used to torment you?’ I remember the woodwork teacher who used to reject all my projects, and rightfully so, I thought, but Heniek was of a different opinion: he detected a connection between the torment at school and collaboration. Podhorecki as an ideological policeman dealt with Jews, seeking them out. He sent several of them together with their rescuers to the other world. ‘Was he a Ukrainian?’ Heniek couldn’t answer that question. ‘A bastard and that’s it!’ he rightly observed.

I only stayed in town two months after the Nazis came and barely stuck my nose out of the house, so I didn’t see much. Trenkler didn’t surprise me; actually, neither did Pachniarz; but I didn’t expect the downfall of Wawrznika or Wojciechowski. I remember how our whole family once observed the festivities of the summer solstice from his place.

I don’t know if their crimes were up to the measure of their punishment. I don’t know if they were the ones that deserved it most, but the first days of liberation saw a great deal of spontaneity. In a small town, people know about each other. This is good, but sometimes it can be terrible.

Heniek brought to my attention the fact that collaboration had to be treated with more attention than I had devoted to it earlier. Five people whom I knew had been sentenced to death in a town—after we subtract the Jews—of 7,000: that’s almost a tenth of a per cent. If we subtract the elderly and the children, then the figure rises a bit, a number not only measurable, but significant, totalling something like 10,000 to 20,000 people on a national
scale. And what of those with long-term prison sentences, or those who managed to leave the country with the retreating Germans, or who mixed with the new settlers in the western territories? What about Trzaskowa and Andzia? After all, only a part of the collaborators were identified—those who were most visible, who didn’t manage to erase their tracks. Although each of them collaborated with the Germans independently, the scale of the problem forces us to look at it as a social phenomenon. And a historical one.

From the second to the sixth grade I attended an elementary school different from the ones that Jewish children went to. I don’t know who ordered the separation, but both sides had a stake in this. The school was for Jewish children, but wasn’t Jewish. The difference was that we didn’t attend school on Saturdays; nor did we have a catechist. We didn’t learn Yiddish or Hebrew. Once a year one of the teachers—for this reason the school employed a Jewish teacher—gave us a lesson in religion, as best she could. We were kept at a distance so that we wouldn’t by any means feel like Poles. Nor—also to be avoided at all costs—would we grow up to be Jews.

The school was a poor relation to the others in town. There were four rooms filled with desks, a blackboard, and an elevated podium. On the walls were an eagle and portraits, but there was no cross. When I was in the fourth grade, Gryboń, who called us lousy Jews, became the school’s director.

Among the younger generation, with my peers and slightly older youth, Zionism ruled almost without opposition. The movements that considered Poland as their motherland were disappearing. I had only read about Folkists, and no one had the nerve to admit being one without facing scorn. Bundists constituted a clan of a few families, as did the communists: the Moszkowicz, Krzywonos’s, and Poznański. There were still the hasidim, but even they, gathering once a year at grandfather’s, entreated the Messiah to come and free them from their troubles.

In the thirties when there was much construction in town, no Jew erected a building nor bought property. Step by step, on a national and local scale, the will to assimilate was taken away from them. Nonetheless, we were becoming Polonised. The state encouraged this, even against its will. Polish culture attracted Jews, traditionally and unchangingly it was favourable to them and hated by. . . Here I hold the narration; it would be wrong politically, as all concerned can write in the appropriate elements in the dotted space.

I attended seventh grade at another school, for Polish children. The principal, Mr Kasprzak, known as Kasper-majcher, ran the school with a regime of Prussian discipline, but he liked me, and I also understood him. Those in favour of ‘counting the bones of the kikes’ found no opportunity for pleasure with him around. On Yom Kippur when no one was able to solve a math problem, he thundered that he’d send for me at the synagogue. He had the support of part of the staff, who were older teachers, perhaps less educated, but who had a high sense of duty.

I had problems with the woodworking teacher, the above-mentioned Podhorecki; with the gym and music teacher; and my Polish teacher, Miss Kierzko, couldn’t stand me, but couldn’t do anything.

After elementary school I didn’t want to go on to secondary school. I wanted to gain a trade so that I could earn a living. In tears I almost convinced my mother that her plans weren’t realistic. What would a Jew need an education for? I said that Natek Stryjkowski, with his law degree, works as a shop assistant at an hardware store, and Leben, once the pride
of the high school, gets by on occasional, and not always clean business deals. What did the supposed genius Jurkiewicz gain with his high school education? And his sister, along with other Jewish graduates of high schools, was running around giving tutorials to wealthy oafs. Mr Lipszyc had a law degree, but fortunately he’s also a master tailor.

I didn’t want to use arguments that would deepen my mother’s pain. Poverty and hunger had forced her to discontinue her own education. She had worked for two years as a temporary teacher but then there was no place for her. Mother stuck to her decision, for the very reasons I didn’t want to mention. She forced me to prepare for high school, and I had to force myself to study for the entrance exam. As I was reading Proust and Joyce on my own, the high school’s reading program repelled me with its triviality.

In 1937 I took the entrance exam. Despite my laziness, I did well. My parents bought me the student cap, notebooks, and a few textbooks for the toughest subjects. However, they couldn’t afford the 55 zloty monthly tuition. We were solvent, but 100 zlotys was a good month’s income, and not every month was good. Most students qualified for reduced rates, and mother was counting that I, a good student, would also qualify. We submitted an application.

So it began. Leaving home before eight, I entered the classroom and took my place at a desk. Things went well up to the first break. After the break, the homeroom teacher called me up in front of the class in a sonorous voice, reprimanding me because my fees had not been paid. The class giggled. Red with shame, I muttered something. The teacher enjoyed our exchange, but I didn’t. An order followed: ‘Pack your books and go home!’ Packing my books, I left the high school humiliated, knowing that the scene would be repeated the next day.

I have no idea what other Jews happened to experience, what humiliations they went through, whether they found acceptance. There weren’t many of them, and the others were well off. The Iwanowicz sat together at one desk. I was with Stefek Wilder, the son of a defence lawyer. Stefek was ashamed of this—in spite of their assimilation, the Wilders were considered Jews. Jews didn’t have Polish friends, but I was a special case. Because of my poverty I was a Żydek—Jew boy—and evoked feelings of superiority.

The worst times occurred during recess, when students got together in larger and smaller groups. No one approached or talked to me. My old friends, Heniek and Gucio, who were in a grade lower than I was, ignored me. Jews didn’t want me either: the Iwanowicz; Marylka Margules; my desk partner, redheaded Stefek, completely shunned me, not even responding when I addressed him directly.

Once when I was gathering my books to return home, a small crowd of boys from school attacked me. The cry arose: ‘Let’s get the Jew!’ There were eight of them, and fortunately they got in each other’s way. They didn’t realize what they were up against, thinking that politeness and bookishness were signs of a weakling. I smashed a few noses, for none of them knew that I practised boxing. I was left alone after that, as there wasn’t anyone eager to take on a strong opponent.

The incident with the boys was a mere battle, for the real war was waged in the principal’s office where I was just a pawn. They refused to reduce my tuition. Now it’s all clear to me, but then we didn’t comprehend how this evident injustice could happen: after all, I was a top student in nearly all subjects, and even children of the wealthy, of officials, landlords, or noble estate owners received reduced rates or were exempt from tuition altogether. We were really poor, and that was quite obvious.
We submitted another application, indicating my clearly high marks and impeccable behaviour. The decision was swift, communicated to me by my homeroom teacher. As usual, it led to my being sent home from class.

Another matter stemmed from the fact that I was no angel. I felt good with the history teacher, as well as in physics and chemistry. Lacking physical skills, I was surprised at my ability to conduct straight-forward experiments. The Polish teacher was aggressive, but I didn’t give in and quickly uncovered gaps in her knowledge of literature. She didn’t know Romain Rolland or du Gard; she didn’t read Boy. At first I restrained myself, but when I became aware that my days in high school were numbered, the devil got the better of me. She would start at me, but I always had the last word. She didn’t stand a chance, not having any idea about problems that were obvious to an erudite member of the intelligentsia. I could pull the wool over her eyes and sometimes resorted to that. When she was rid of me, she probably felt relieved.

The principal taught mathematics. He was quite methodical and a good teacher of that subject. Quite often, no student could solve a problem until I raised my hand. The principal raised his voice: ‘Only one of you and it’s him!’ He stressed the pronoun, emphasizing the position of the pariah. In the lonely battle I found a little comfort. Singled out, disapproved of, I felt something of a hero: alone against them all. Żeromski prepared me for this role.

Once I experienced a special victory. With feigned shyness I raised my hand and said: ‘Sir, the problem can be solved in two more ways!’ The principal was dumbfounded, as he wasn’t interested in the solutions. The class was silent for a moment, and the shot hit its mark. My fate was already certain.

The gym teacher had an easier time with me, as she was young. I was heavy and not good at jumping, and I also lacked enthusiasm for soccer. The gym teacher openly mocked me, and that was a shame, because she was pretty!

I’ll try to sum up my high-school experience. Jews constituted a third of the town’s population and a tenth of the district’s, yet out of two hundred students at that level, only six were Jewish: just 3 percent. Considering how much Jews value education, that statistic was a measure of the tragic situation. This discrimination didn’t affect the wealthy, as their money opened many doors, but it took away hope for people like my parents and myself. In independent Poland, the patterns of Russian nationalistic policies had been revived or perhaps had persisted. Discrimination against Jews in Poland was more drastic than discrimination against Poles in Russia, about which so much is recorded in literature and history and which supposedly was the cause of uprisings.

Mother took on a hopelessly unrealistic battle. By contrast, rational people, Jewish Jews, didn’t make such attempts but assessed their chances soberly. I had talented friends: Heniek and Herman Beatus, Tobka Witkowska, Srulek Hampel, Mala Weintraub, Romek Blum, Itka Weingarten. Their parents didn’t knock their heads against the wall; what would have been gained? They knew what they were up against and acted accordingly.

I returned home to hammer settees and sew quilts. My experience was a trifle, as others had experienced worse humiliations. Yet it was unique and was my own. I avoided my peers, those in school uniforms with school bags full of books and notebooks. They ignored me, or if they paid any attention, it was to scorn me. It was no big deal to solve algebra problems; the big deal turned out to be something else. In the eyes of others, the poor, I could also see scorn. Clearly, I belonged neither to one group nor to the other. When there was nothing to do, I left home, and went past the town. It was autumn, and I would return cold,
sometimes soaked. My shoes were falling apart; they had to be constantly repaired.

But I was convinced that I would still get an education. For myself and for my mother. I felt compelled to do this. This decision had been made for me by the principal and the homeroom teacher whose name I can’t recall; evidently I’m less vengeful than I thought I was, and it’s not even worth bothering about her. . . .

Decades have gone by. If I’ve accomplished anything, it’s mainly due to the stinging experience of those two months, back in some forgotten time. I know that sometimes it would be sensible not to make problems for myself and take the easy way, but I can’t. I push forward, often ineffectively, sometimes for no discernible reason or purpose.

If we look at this lesson against the background of the complex issue of Polish-Jewish relations, then we realise that Polish antisemitism, sometimes bloody, sometimes rhetorical, wasn’t as logical as either the German or Russian version. Nevertheless, it was always arrogant and created an acute sense of humiliation. The arrogance didn’t affect the Jews in the ghettos, as they had had centuries of experience behind them and knew what to expect of the not so much Christian as Roman Catholic surroundings. Instead, the arrogance affected those who felt they were citizens and wanted to leave the ghetto. Hence, there were inherited resentments even after generations, in people such as American professors, or French artists, whose grandparents had experienced humiliation and scorn. And the grudges thrive within me, but that’s another matter, sometimes comic, more often sad.

Pavel Miliukov—a poor politician but an excellent scholar and writer—claimed that in fifteenth-seventeenth century Russia, the Greeks who served it ‘had their own national patriotism, narrow and exclusive, prescribing a sharp boundary between themselves and others. . . . Forced to practice flattery and kowtow in order to gain favours, in the depths of their hearts they felt scorn and ill will toward their barbarian protectors. For these feelings the Muscovites repaid them with suspicion and distrust.’

Miliukov formulated a model that unfortunately is applicable to Polish-Jewish relations in the Second Republic of Poland.

I tightened my belt and straightened up to my full height of more than 6 foot 6 inches instead of my usual stoop, and went to see my old school principal Mr Kasprzak. He lived alone because part of his family had been killed and part had died. He had a pension and stayed in a little room over the school. He was pleasantly surprised to see me, as in his mind he had given me up for dead. We went for a walk. Startling me with his cordiality, he talked while I listened. ‘I liked you; I knew you’d grow up to be a somebody. How couldn’t I know about your war with Gryboń and later with Goszcz. You saw that I didn’t like antisemitism, that everyone was a human being to me. I was also proud, and you don’t even know how much I had to fight as a principal. Now I don’t have the strength; I don’t even know when I became old. I manage alone, for all my life I was isolated.’

The praise was premature. I was still a man of promise, but I needed encouragement. I think Kasprzak felt uplifted by my visit. He was severe, for in not allowing people to get close to him, he rarely found out that he had done something good, that people were grateful. Just like everyone near the end of his life, he wanted to believe that he hadn’t lived in vain. He was no more than sixty, but the war had left its mark on him, and probably he was exhausted from the grind of teaching. A few years later he was no longer alive.

Janka Ryczkowa had survived. I visited her. She knew that I was around and awaited my arrival. Her husband, the owner of the sawmill by the train station, had perished. She had survived by hiding in the local manors, where because of her husband’s dealings they had
friends. I noticed that select people had survived, either those toughened through poverty, like Wanne, or, conversely, those well off with connections in the manors. These included the owner of the oil mill, the miller’s wife, the lawyer’s family. I couldn’t appreciate it then, not realizing certain things, maybe because in other districts the manors were a base for the national armed forces and were tragic places for their thoughtless and abominable antisemitism.

For a seven-year-old, a teacher was an authority, a person from the adult world. I didn’t realize that she had been a young girl. This generation gap was maintained, for a dozen years is a lot, and even cousins a couple of years older considered me to be a child. And Ryczkowa was beautiful, with an unhappy but snobbish marriage behind her. She had been Mrs Kronenberg, totally beyond me. Now, when we sat in the small living room, our positions had narrowed. We were close to each other, two severed appendages from a nonexistent world. She was still very attractive, and I was a young man who had seen the outside world. She had always been cordial with me, and I always looked upon her with sensuous awe. A mutual attraction germinated.

Some visitors interrupted us in the twilight. I felt relieved, as I was not able to overcome my reserve, nor to accept its existence. I visited her after a year. A year later she immigrated to be with relatives. I thought she moved to Australia, but it was actually to Israel, to Tel Aviv.

Yet another meeting, an earlier one. The autumn of 1944, twenty-two days after my encounter with Wanne and after the same number of days of travel, I had arrived in Lublin from Uzbekistan and went in the direction of the headquarters in town. Then I saw two familiar faces: the gym teacher who had always looked upon me with scorn was walking hand in hand with the physics teacher. Benedykt Lusthaus was a Jew, probably baptized, certainly a better one than a physics teacher. When I was a student he was friendly toward me, and afterward he ostentatiously responded to my greetings.

Now, walking together, they were positively beaming, I don’t know if from love and the sunny weather, or simply from a new sense of security. They made a nice, well-matched couple.

I wanted to embrace them, but I didn’t. I stood as they passed by, but they didn’t notice me, and I was hard to recognise. I was ashamed of my Soviet rags and the lice crawling all over me. And I had changed beyond recognition. I also had the experience with the gym teacher in mind. We passed each other.

The Lusthauses had been elegant in pre-war days, but after a moment I realized that they were wearing the same clothes as in the summer of 1939. What they must have experienced during the war I surmised later. The gym teacher surprised me, as I never thought she’d relate to a markedly Jewish person. I thought she had picked on me because she couldn’t stand Jews. It turns out that there could have been other reasons. The romance probably dated from before the war, but no one in town had gossiped about it; apparently it was a secret.

Everyone is self-educated. This is true in my case to a greater degree than for most people. It can’t be helped if it sounds pompous, but my true school was the public library. Founded by Jewish journeymen with a few university or high school students in 1903, during the great mental awakening in the whole empire in the years preceding World War II, the
The library had 10,000 volumes: 7,000 in Polish, 2,000 in Yiddish, a few hundred in Hebrew, and some individual volumes in German.

Each day, excluding holidays, the doors opened at seven in the evening, upstairs at forwarding-agent Bulka’s place where the library was located. Members of the board stood behind the barriers to hand out and receive books, to accept membership dues, and to put everything in order and tidy up after closing time. The library subsisted on membership dues, 50 groszy a month from two hundred members, some of whom were behind in their payments; it received no subsidies. The board worked on a volunteer basis; belonging to it was an honour, a high one in my estimation. The members were Strykowski, Leben, Elberg, and Kawa. They bought and chose the books, so I owe my education to them. Aside from communists, who weren’t allowed on the board, there were no party restrictions. The collection contained books by anti-Jewish authors such as Céline and Nowaczyński.

Various people were readers. The communist Moszkowicz, who was a poor tailor suffering from tuberculosis; Strykowski, a revisionist; Łajka Witkowska, who saved Menahem Begin from starving in the Soviet Union, was a Bund member. There were no hasidim, as their stance on culture and the world excluded the reading of secular books. If a young Hasid showed up, it was a sign that soon enough he would cut his peyes and don a jacket. The enlightened Orthodox participated in the life of the library, and there were many of them.

A simple calculation: there were 3,000 Jews in the town, or 2,000, if we don’t count the Hasidim. Two hundred members meant that every third family was connected to the library, the most popular Jewish organization in town.

I wonder if I haven’t idealized the library. Not everything was so impressive, and in various towns there were philosophizing barbers, like those described by Słonimski, but there was no compulsion to philosophize in this or in any other trade. Books weren’t only read for intellectual inspiration, but also for entertainment, to give rein to unfulfilled dreams. Many young ladies asked for ‘something light’; life supplied enough problems from which heads were bursting. The librarians wouldn’t lower their standards to collect books by Mniszkówna (Helena Mniszek—the author of popular melodramas), who set the boundary for taste. Younger readers enjoyed works by Karol May, Verne, Sienkiewicz, Przyborowski, or Gąsiorowski. Marczyński and Nasielski satisfied the need for prurient literature.

Thus the library was concerned with the needs of all types of readers. The showcase, however, consisted of classics from Poland and other countries. There were French authors translated by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, as well as literary hits, naturally bought on sale but carefully collected. Already there was Joyce, Witkiewicz, and Wittlin. After the war, I discovered Schulz and Gombrowicz, though their names had been previously known to me.

The library was a meeting place. After seven o’clock you knew you could find someone to talk to. Groups formed because reading books united people. It was interesting that despite social and political differences, I never witnessed any quarrels; an unspoken understanding was honoured. The discussions were surprisingly mature, considering that most of the readers didn’t have much education beyond elementary school. Doctor Bulka was a respected physician, but he treated my opinions about books seriously. Democracy flourished despite the Jewish tendency toward contentiousness. The common elements were the love of culture, a striving for the world and for light, universal values; these were crucial for people from the provinces.

These values were mediated through the Polish language. A printed report on the
library’s activities from just before the war has survived. In 1910 during the Russian partition, Polish books constituted 71 percent of the collection, the rest were Yiddish, with a few in Russian or Hebrew. A total of 66 percent of the books loaned out were Polish. In 1936, the proportions of the collection remained pretty much the same, if we omit the fact that the Russian books had somehow vanished. Reading habits had changed: 90.6 percent of the books taken out were in Polish, 8.7 percent Yiddish, 0.7 percent Hebrew.

A Jewish social institution polonized the rejected minority. What followed is similar to what I once wrote about the Ukrainian minority: it experienced cultural assimilation without national assimilation and with the impossibility of state assimilation. There was nonetheless a difference: Ukrainians were ostracized even though an attempt was made to polonize them, but Jews were not wanted at all.

There was another library in town. I’m not certain if it was public or communal. It was subsidized with a full-time librarian and was located by the church. I never entered it, just as no Pole entered the Jewish one. From what I could see among my friends, it had a poor selection of books. My friend Gucio looked enviously at the books I was reading that were unavailable to him.

I wonder whether I’m not biased. At Kula’s bookstore I recall occasionally noticing some books of interest, some published by Rój and Mortkowicz, including ones by Bernanos, who wasn’t to be found in our library. At Kula’s there were mainly uninteresting, devotional books, but it was apparent that there were book lovers beyond the Jewish world. I didn’t know anything about them. My high-school teachers were beyond suspicion. Maybe readers included some officials, perhaps gentry estate owners from the district, some army officers? The two parallel worlds could not meet. . . . Even years after the problem no longer has any meaning, I think of it with a certain measure of fear. Why were the barriers so strong that even mutual cultural tastes couldn’t help us to overcome them?

In 1939, the Germans burned the books of our library. On its site, opened shortly before the war, they established a German army command office. Incinerating books—this has always been the case—was an augury of burning people, and the augury became true. Now I was looking for one book with a stamp. I wanted at least one, a relic, a trace of a couple of generations, the youth of my memory. But those who had built the library had already swam away, so tiny, on nut shells, and the rains that came washed away the traces of people and their accomplishments. I didn’t find a thing. People were amazed that I didn’t reclaim my grandfather’s property, or my uncle’s; after all, I could have taken over a store, sold a house: that would have brought me good money! I’m surprised at myself.

The photo of Słodki’s and Kurowski’s execution, taken by an anonymous photographer, probably German, gained international renown. Every few years, children and the elderly look at it on television in America, Germany, Japan; almost all film makers that create something about the Holocaust use them. A perfect shot, a tragedy reduced to a legible symbol. Two small, pitiful figures rolled up in mortal fear or mortal spasm. From the photograph it’s impossible to tell who is who, as the lens levelled large Kurowski with diminutive Słodki. They show it in films and books on the Holocaust; Roman Catholic Kurowski plays the Jew, but isn’t there something of a Jew in every murdered victim?

The photograph is shocking. In this instance, the photographer chose a natural angle: the victims are small, reduced to beetles or nut shells; the soldiers in Feldgrau uniforms, with their rifles at eye level—huge, monstrous. But can an execution be photographed from a
different angle?

Witnesses of the execution told me that Father Kabata, the priest, approached the bound victims and, weeping, embraced them. And Słodki the hasid accepted the viaticum from the priest. Jews constantly told each other about this in amazement. The priest and the Jew, Kabata and Słodki.

I often saw Father Kabata before the war. He was the only priest whom I recognized and knew by name. His brother was a doctor, the owner of a house by the river, the only house in town with running water and sewage. Dr Kabata was active in the Stronnictwo Chłopskie (Peasant Party). His daughters were more or less my age, but they were an inaccessible patrician family and we never exchanged a word.

The execution of hostages was no surprise. All armies did the same. Two people more, two less, especially older people who survived the war, didn’t see anything unusual in it. That a priest treated a Jew as a fellow human being, that he didn’t differentiate between a Greek and a Jew: that was beyond anyone’s experience, not just that of my interlocutors, but mine as well. I still have Jewish amazement before my eyes. Questions germinated that Jews couldn’t even formulate.

I could write a polyphonic novel about this incident before the high-school wall, about the murdering Germans, the victims, Father Kabata, what those who escaped execution felt, and those who knew that their time would come, about the collision of worlds and the axiological conflict. Maybe someone will write it.

Not only the Jews were surprised, but the few Poles who continued to come to us also kept returning to the event. I felt that the humane impulse of the priest had surprised them and that something had burst inside. Solidarity with Jews stopped being inappropriate, all because a Catholic priest exhibited it. He even showed the way.

Who knows if that act of mercy didn’t bear fruit after the war, with a friendly attitude toward the surviving Jews. However, this observation has a reverse side. Maybe where Jews continued to be murdered, a Father Kabata was missing. Even in 1968, the episcopate did not condemn antisemitism; they feared the reaction of the provincial priests.

Before the war, a Jewish state was a utopian idea that then was removed from reality by the Holocaust, but Jews had argued about the shape of Israel and its future legal order. Jewish society, like the Polish one (only in a much more radical manner), lacked a unifying centre. Zionism dominated, but within the framework of one goal there were two forces concentrated at extreme ends. The centre was delicate and brittle; it didn’t unite, as in Polish political life. On the right wing—concentrated in the paramilitary Betar—were the Revisionists, and according to popular opinion they were fascists. This opinion was unfair, as in a free state the movement fits into a parliamentary democracy.

The organization had hidden connections. Its leader, the young lawyer Mojżesz Lewin, underwent intensive military training in 1937. At a time when Jews couldn’t even advance to the status of senior rifleman, he became a reserve captain and left for Palestine. Before leaving, he ordered a quilt. I didn’t sympathize with the movement, but I sewed the quilt very carefully. Since the movement attracted well-off youth, which were not many, the Revisionists were few in number.

The left was dominated by the socialist Zionist Hehaluts.’ It was a mass movement that could afford to have its facilities in a proper centre that had once been a small theatre, of which a curtain and a podium remained. It was always crowded and loud there. In the middle of the main room was a ping-pong table, in the corner was a snack bar with lemonade and
pastry, and in the entrance hall they played chess. People were always happy to see me at the place, mainly as a chess player. Organizational life was concentrated at the podium, sequestered from the main room; teenagers of both sexes sang and discussed matters under the leadership of Esterka Lipszyc.

Esterka’s parents were hasidim. They had a store, the one smelling of unaired bedding. Esterka had broken away and passed through a preparatory kibbutz. Now she led the halutsim. She was a pretty girl, a talented organizer, and despite her young age, a good teacher. It seemed to me she was so immersed in the movement that she had no time for feelings. I was surprised to learn she was romantically involved with the young Bajrach, a friend from the organization. Shortly before the war they left for Palestine. I’m uncertain about whether they got visas or arrived illegally. But they were among the few who were saved.

It was probably in 1934 that a kibbutz was established in the town, like the one Esterka went through, preparing people for life in Palestine. It was located on Kolska Street, and I visited it frequently. Far-reaching collectivism was the rule in the kibbutz, and members would refuse to accept a slice of bread if they couldn’t share it with the others. That slice of bread had meaning, as everyone was underfed and sometimes went hungry. They did manual work, taking on every job, but often there wasn’t enough work.

The kibbutzniks impressed and amazed me. I understood and even approved of resigning from ambitions, but I couldn’t practise their ascetic vision. They could. They accomplished impossible things, restoring a state and transforming a nation. Even before the war, kibbutzim served as a model, a legend. Chemie Wanne formed a kibbutz with his friends when they left town. Young conspirators preparing the Warsaw ghetto uprising joined together in a kibbutz. The members were or were not Zionists, but the kibbutzim were a signpost for them. In my memory the hometown kibbutzniks impressed upon me an unsurpassable model of character.

Twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, were market days, and once a month there was a fair. The town was filled with motion and commotion in both squares. One bore the name Freedom Square; the other was Potter’s Square. Before the war the latter was renamed Castle Square, as the town once had had a castle. Swedish arsonists had burned it down during the seventeenth-century invasion known as the Deluge.

The fair differed from the market in its scale. Stall keepers came from the entire district, displaying clothes and odds and ends. Country shoemakers displayed clogs, slippers, and Russian leather boots; furniture makers offered French-polished wardrobes and beds; and card players looked for the naive.

The market was more modest. The town and village looked after their immediate business matters. Rural people earned money for salt, thread, matches, kerosene, and shoe leather, while the urban inhabitants bought groceries. Because of the upcoming weekend, on Fridays the market was larger, and fishmongers put out their tubs of fish only on that day.

When I was small, my mother would take me shopping. We would pass through the rows of people along Freedom Square. Some women stood, and some sat on the curb, passively waiting for buyers. The country people sold whatever they could.

On Potter’s Square the potters set up their stalls, probably from time immemorial, since they gave the place its name. Harness makers displayed their wares; clothes were sold; peasants brought peat. Peat was a poor fuel, as it gave uneven heat and was smoky. Cases of
asphyxiation occurred repeatedly, lighting the stove was difficult, and ashes were removed from the stove in amounts that weren’t much smaller than those which had filled the stove in the first place. However, peat had one advantage: it was cheap—a wagonload cost 5 to 8 zlotys. I couldn’t help but be amazed, as the peat more or less cost the same as the rental of the wagon. The product was free, and the peasant didn’t count the natural resource recovered from the ground or his own labour.

Markets and fairs, I learned while studying, played a central role in the life of the local community. They were a place where group relations were developed, as well as economic and even national consciousness.

I try to imagine what the peasant felt, whether poor or rich, selling his products on the market for what in his—justified—opinion was an uneconomical return, and buying city products, in the same opinion, for too high a price. The natural distrust of others, like the distrust for the city, was channelled into the mold of antisemitism, especially since the church supplied the substantiating ideology. If anything surprises me, it’s that in spite of everything antisemitism was rather weak in our district.

On the other hand, the impoverished Jews envied the peasants for not having to buy potatoes or cabbages, the staples of nourishment. Father said that if he only had five hectares of even poor land he’d show how much it could produce. It should be mentioned that if he had the money to buy five hectares of land he’d have gotten by much better in the city. But my poor father generally dreamed of getting out of the rut that fate and heritage had placed him in. With these desires he lacked any chance.

Janka reminds me: ‘Don’t forget to mention what we said about beggars in your account.’ Janka didn’t experience poverty, for she was brought up in a manor, in a good family with high cultural aspirations. But either her own sensitivity, or her father’s teaching, resulted in streams of the impoverished who coursed through her manor, embedding themselves in her memory.

Żebractwo, żebry, żebranina, żebranie, żebrak: how many variants of the tragic noun beggar are there in Polish! Żebry were the lowest of the lot. Wanne may have experienced hunger and lived in a slum, but he had a roof over his head, fit into some kind of community, could find some work, and had a chance to rise from below the poverty line to its boundary. Certainly his family received welfare—otherwise they wouldn’t have gotten by—but they got it without begging, without public humiliation. Thus there were various levels beneath the poverty line.

There were people in town from other places who went ‘for a handout’—yet another synonymous expression. The beggars from our town, too, went for a handout elsewhere. Perhaps they might have encountered more sympathy from the local community, but they would have had to hang their heads even lower.

The disabled and misfits lived from begging, the oldest form of social welfare. Going for a handout was the function of an unlucky fate. To a greater extent it was a function of the economic state of affairs, of depressions and unemployment. If there were no other indices, the economic condition of the country could be assessed on the basis of the number of wandering beggars. I don’t remember begging on a massive scale before 1930. After that, there wasn’t a day when a few beggars didn’t pass through the yard and kitchen. After 1935, there were not as many of them; one a day, sometimes even none.

Begging would take different forms. Some would sing in the front yards, straining their throats but not asking for anything. They had to hold their heads high in order for their
voices to reach the upper storey. Thanks to the singing beggars and their varied repertoire, I learned all the hits. Likewise, the first time I came across Broniewski’s poetry was when a singing poet shouted: ‘One has to live, there’s no bread, the worker has a hard life, oh Lord, the worker has a hard life.’ Usually my parents pretended not to hear the singing, but this time my father told me to go down and give them 10 groszy.

Those who couldn’t sing, the most numerous category, would go door to door with their hands held out, their eyes glued to the ground, their heads hanging, their chins tucked to their chests as if they had no neck. They muttered a few words or didn’t say anything at all. They received 5 groszy or 1, or a slice of bread; when times were especially hard, the door wasn’t opened.

Should the art student from the Academy of Fine Arts be counted in this category? He was the one who in 1928 went from house to house, with portfolio in hand and drew well-crafted pencil or chalk portraits for 50 groszy. And so I was captured at that time in an adroit, naturalistic portrait. Many years later when I started to attend exhibition openings, I discovered that the wandering artist was Tadeusz Kulisiewicz. I associated him with poverty because when he entered our place he was rather slouched. His head was hanging between his shoulders, exactly like the beggars. After a short while, when he was offered a glass of tea and started drawing, he straightened up.

Jewish beggars would spend the night in the synagogue or in the hasidic prayer house. When father went to pray, he would check to see if there were lice on the pew. I don’t know where Polish beggars spent their nights. Saturday was a holiday, and rich Jews would invite wandering beggars for the Friday supper and Saturday dinner. The beggars would eat their meals in silence, say the prayers with others, and leave. No one invited them to stay.

The image of the beggars is engraved in my eyes; it sticks fast. I’ve noticed that in humiliating circumstances I hang my head low between my shoulders and lose my neck. I write of this to explain why all my life I’ve found it repugnant to ask for anything: protection, love, friendship.

While we lived at Wodna Street there was a slum on Gwoździarska Street, the street perpendicular to us, that I passed by each day. In the basement was a hangout for the town’s nether world, where the constant sound of commotion, women’s cries, and drunken shouting could be heard. My parents cautioned me to be careful while walking close to this place.

In the same basement lived a Jewish family that was neither of the begging class nor criminals themselves. I don’t recall their surname, even though their daughter Izka attended the same grade as I did. She was a nice, modest, even bright girl, but I wasn’t allowed to play with her. Her name itself made one think of insects, and the teachers exaggeratedly examined her cleanliness.

On the ground floor lived the Fordońskis, the owners of a store with wagon accessories, as well as the hat maker Góralnik. Toward the courtyard lived the caretaker; his son Januszek, three years my senior, used to beat me quite badly, which is why I took up boxing. Now I met Janusz at the entryway to the building. The former bully admitted that he had served in my division and often saw me, but didn’t greet me because he was afraid. So I understood that he took our childhood fights seriously and was convinced that I’d take revenge.

I knew the ground-floor apartment of the Zylberbergs quite well. Mr Zylberberg worked at the Kowalskis’ mill. The Kowalskis were Jews, but the mill operated on Saturday
and Zylberberg worked then. I know little about him, and can’t remember if he ever said anything in my presence. The main person at home was his wife. She was the prematurely aged mother of seven children.

I wrote above that they lived in an apartment, but it was more like a room. A room in which nine people lived, worked, and bottled up their emotions. During the day machines worked ceaselessly; the mother and daughters sewed shirts for 12 groszy a piece. Bread cost 25 groszy, a kilo of kosher meat 2 zlotys. In order to earn a living they had to work methodically and sloppily.

My peer was Blumka, a pretty and bright girl, an excellent student, but her older siblings, Hela and Jurek, who had the surname Jurkiewicz, were unusually talented and were considered so about town.

At the beginning of the twenties when there was a Jewish high school, its teachers paid attention to the neglected, eager children and took them under their care. At home they didn’t have the conditions to study. Hela did her homework at the dentist Najman’s, and for several years Jurek ate dinners at our place and did his work. He returned home at night.

The Jewish high school closed down when Hela and Jurek had only completed half the program. They were accepted at the Polish high school where they were relieved of their dues—theirs was a better time than mine. They were teenagers then and earned money giving tutorials. There were many students who didn’t set as much store on an education as their parents did, and tutors were able to profit on this dissonance. Likewise, several young Jews, eager to learn but unable to attend high school, were able to prepare for an extramural high-school diploma with their help. The Jurkiewiczs charged a lot, 1 zloty per hour, later 2, but they were excellent teachers. After graduating from high school they stayed in town. The diploma was highly regarded. It gave a living, but not a future; in the thirties there were already too many Polish diploma-holders, and the Jurkiewiczs were Jewish.

Shortly before the war the news broke out: Hela had gotten married. I didn’t learn who he was, only that he was a Pole, an official. I remember my last conversation with Hela, when we happened to meet in the park. She had always been pretty, but the aroused femininity brought out the beauty in her. In her face in which I had always seen a teacher’s seriousness, you could detect hints of sensual gaiety. I witnessed the secrets of sexuality that I only knew from descriptions. Hela sat by me and laughed, and I sat by her, a distracted teenager.

I stammered from yet another reason. I knew that Hela had become baptized. It was something more than a change of creed, and I doubt that her accepting baptism was religiously motivated. Jewishness was always an integral phenomenon, with nationality and religion united in a whole. There had already been ruptures in this totality: the Bund and the Jewish left were in conflict with religion, but their Jewishness was unquestionable, and they were pioneers in a sense of nationality. Among the intelligentsia there were those who admitted their Polishness without rejecting their Jewish identity. There would have been more of them if their Polishness had been accepted; even those who added splendour to Polish culture—Tuwim, Rubinstein, and Tarski—were only considered Poles by a narrow elite; for the average citizen they were Jews, not rarely with additional negative adjectives. Christianity was an option that rejected Jewishness. It was a rupture, apostasy.

No society likes apostates, and Jews didn’t like them either. There was a time when such converts were accursed, but that belonged to the past, as Jewish communities had no executive power over apostates. But relations were still cut off with them. Only after the war
did I learn that my mother’s cousin from the Lublin middle class was a convert, and I discovered that by accident. I had known Jan G. for years without realizing we were related. In another example, mother’s grandfather found out that his cousin was not some anonymous Jew but Stanislaw Posner who hadn’t even become baptized but gave up Jewish customs. My great-grandfather changed his name in order to not be associated with such an apostate. Nothing was said about them. They ceased to exist and threw a shadow deeper than that of a criminal. The cotton trader Horuńczyk, the father of good chess players, didn’t maintain relations with his baptized brother. That brother always made a sad impression: rejected by Jews, not accepted by Catholics, he was always isolated. Both brothers went to the ghetto and up in smoke; a macabre question: did they at least make peace in the face of Auschwitz?

Catholicism was connected to antisemitism, and this was especially clear just before the war. There were exceptions, and a current fighting with antisemitism did exist. After the war it played an important role, but at that time I knew nothing of it. In 1937 baptism meant going over to the side of those doing the beating and abandoning the beaten.

I can’t recall if anyone made any remarks in Hela’s case. Evidently she was already considered lost, on the way out. I think there may have been some understanding of her dilemma, but I’m not sure, as my parents never confided in me about whether they experienced a sense of duality, and said nothing about being at a loss. I don’t even know if they articulated these problems to themselves.

Once more about Gwoździarska Street, about Jurek and Blumka. When he got older the attitude toward Jurek at our home was ambivalent. His talent was valued, but it was said that he kept ‘bad company’. At my age he wasn’t any company at all, but in the warnings was a good dose of the attitude toward Gwoździarska Street: it was commonly held that nothing good could come of that house. What’s more, Jurek wasn’t a model of virtue. He kept his head uncovered, didn’t go to the synagogue, didn’t keep the Sabbath, and probably ate treyf food; he was on friendly terms with goyim, and what’s worse, with shikses, or Polish girls. Moreover, he played cards, I don’t know if it was elegant bridge or the popular games. I only played chess, but Jurek really did stay up at cards until late at night.

However, it became necessary to drop principles and use his help. When I was fourteen and preparing for the high-school entrance exam, my original tutor couldn’t help me. Jurek took on the task for a symbolic sum. Only then did I learn what he was really like. He worked intensely and, with my inclination to absorb good and bad influences, his concentration inspired me. An hour of work with him more than made up for a whole day of high-school drudgery. A Jew has to prove that he has greater qualifications than are required. Jurek was a Jew physically. Socially, he more than made up for both.

I’m a teacher who likes his work and yet I realize that it’s a rare occasion for me to achieve the teaching intensity that my twenty-two-year-old mentor attained. I understood what meaning cards had for Jurek—a way to relax after a full day’s concentration when he had to be simultaneously a Latin, Polish, and physics teacher, and who knows what else in the framework of the high-school program. A year later he helped me to prepare for the extramural high-school final exams in two months.

The last time I saw him was in November of 1939. He had already visited Soviet occupied Lviv. He shook his head and didn’t want to say anything, preferring to be under the German occupation. He had completed a year of law studies and made a few influential friends. I warned him about the Jewish fate, as I had no doubt about this matter. But I
couldn’t convince him. He was friends with a high-ranking police officer who was reorganizing the service for the Germans in Warsaw. He counted on his appropriate appearance to help him survive in the large city. Every choice was bad, but he chose the worst. After the war I looked for him, and several times it seemed that I was onto his trail, but I lost it. He was one of those who didn’t fulfil their promise, although he had it in abundance. He was one of the stars of my youth.

My chats with Jurek were looked upon askance at home, but no one had anything against my friendship with Blumka; my parents’ value system was inconsistent, as life corroded it. Blumka was the embodiment of constancy and dignity; my parents liked her and thought that she had a stabilizing influence on me. We often did our homework together in elementary school. Her notebooks were impeccable, and her homework was perfectly done. In town they probably thought of us as a match. Jewish couples rarely married out of great passion, and if business or matchmaking were not involved, then friendship was the strongest bond. In 1939, after escaping to the Soviet side we kept together. We were separated, and together with my parents I got to the Ural Mountains while Blumka was somewhere by the Volga. We wrote to each other, but later our letters stopped arriving. In 1968 I learned she was living in London, but the letter I sent was returned marked address unknown. I was told her sister Roza had been saved by people in town. I looked for her but didn’t find her. It’s a shame, but I don’t know what we’d have to say to each other now, Jurek, Hela, Blumka: the residents of the slum on Gwoździeńska Street.

Minerva’s owl flies out at dusk, the meaning of life emerges in fulfilment, writing about people whose life was cut short is troublesome, since precocious children grow up to be ordinary bread-winners. Writing of those destroyed before the test is like writing a cheque that won’t be cashed.

The Gelbarts had an accessories shop: true, it was a little beyond the normal shopping route, but it was still in a good site, just by the parish church. They were quite successful and could get credit without any problem. They were deeply pious in their quiet way. When I try to remember them, an image of the whole family going to the synagogue on Saturday morning emerges. Everyone in the family had flat feet, so they went without grace, but in all seriousness, in their holiday best.

They had one son who was two or three years older than I was. I befriended the young Gelbart when we met at the library. To me he seemed quite interesting, even exotic: the only one of my friends who was genuinely religious. Even Kant—we admired The Critique of Pure Reason—was able to strengthen his faith. Then I was surprised, but now I think I understand, Kant’s agnosticism was a support for him; faith was a choice of a road into the unknowable, an option for a lifestyle emerging from experience, going against destruction. After primary school, Gelbart prepared for the high-school final exam at home. He was probably aided by a tutor, but I’m not sure who. Whoever it was had no problems with him, as Gelbart had quite a lot of self-discipline and didn’t need supervision. In 1939, a few months before the war broke out, Gelbert took his final exam in Poznań, where they disliked Jews. Extramural exams were usually harsh, but in this case it was obvious that the examiners wanted to fail him. He had a conflict in Polish, and they were looking for any way to catch him, until he expressed his objections to the examiner’s command of Polish. The mathematics examiner said he had just ‘one more question’ upon which the result of the exam
depended, namely, how many hairs are there in a horse’s tail. Gelbart gave a large arbitrary number. The examiner, feeling his success was at hand, asked: ‘And how will you prove this?’ The unperturbed candidate retorted right off the bat: ‘Ah, sir, that’s the second question. You’re going against your word!’

I almost felt as if the diploma he brought home with nothing but the highest marks was my personal success. In the autumn of 1939 I was to pass the extramural minor high school exam. If Gelbart could do it, so could I. He wanted to become a rabbi, but a modern one, with a background in philosophy. When I wrote about the library I related that 1 percent of the books loaned out were in Hebrew; that 1 percent represented mainly his reading activities.

When the war broke out he was nineteen. Deported to the General Government region, he died of hunger and sickness, was badgered or gassed to death. How did he die? With philosophical calm, in his manner analysing the inhuman reality, breaking it down to primary elements, or possibly broken in spirit by the hunger, diseases, and fear. No one knows how one will behave in the ultimate trial, nor can anyone know how another person will respond. I want to believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and the Ten Commandments didn’t leave him before his last breath, giving him courage and peace of mind. ‘I dream at night of my brother who died, whose eyes were gouged out, whose bones were broken with a club. . . . ’ (Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, fragment of a poem written in 1943) I continue to dream of him.

The Hampels lived on Targowa (Market) Street. You entered their home through a passageway into the courtyard, then went up to the second floor. There they lived in a room. Above them, in the attic, was the caretaker, together with the town’s main brothel, probably three prostitutes and a pimp, an elegant ex-official who lost his job. Each evening when the stores closed, the prostitutes moved out onto the main street, the Third of May Street, back and forth, from the market square to the church, until they scored.

But back to the Hampels. The head of the family was a typesetter for Heber’s print shop, but during my time there was little work in his profession and he had to do whatever would allow his family to get by each day. Sometimes I saw him at the fair selling hats, sometimes used clothes. He acted as a go-between from time to time, and probably did other things. He went around with a worried expression, and his family lived modestly, but even a poor living required ingenuity. One had to take advantage of every opportunity not to go under. Each groszy earned counted.

To top it off, Hampel was a highly principled man who belonged to the Bund. The Bund was a socialist party that held Poland to be the home of its Jews. From this stemmed their parting of ways with Zionism, or even with the left. Their struggle with the dominance of rabbis estranged them not only from the hasidim, but also from the more moderate Orthodox. On account of their socialism, they had the town’s middle class against them, and on account of their stance toward the Soviet Union, they earned the bitter condemnation of the communists. If the Jews were a suppressed minority, then the Bundists were a universally isolated minority within the minority. Once a party to be reckoned with, by my time the Bund was a relic of the past and membership in it was considered to be a senseless act of loyalty and constancy.

The Bund had some crypto-supporters and due to arrangements with some apolitical organizations it was able to get a representative in the Jewish council and municipal board.
Publicly, however, very few people acknowledged the party or its ideology. The Bundists had their headquarters in a shabby hut. Several times I attended meetings of their youth organization, called ‘Tsukunft’, which meant the future, but in fact they had no future. The organization was legal, but during meetings they didn’t light a kerosene lamp, because why should people know who came? There were four of us there, five at the most. There was no comparison with the rowdy meetings of Hehaluts.

In our town the party was associated with the Hampels and Witkowskis. The latter, however, moved to bigger cities in later years: Łajka to Warsaw and her brother to Łódź. Only Hampel remained in town. He stood his ground like a banner without an army.

I don’t remember Mrs Hampel’s face or her voice, even though the burden of maintaining such a household was hers, and she assured that their meagre, irregular means allowed them to survive. It was to her credit that the room was always tidy, that I never heard complaints, that the children were always clean and well brought up. I don’t know how she did it; then I didn’t appreciate it, and now I realize that her accomplishments bordered on the heroic. They had three children: my friend Srulek who was a year older than me, Cela, who was two years younger than he was, and Icuś, four years younger.

Srulek played a major role in my childhood games. He was erect in his posture and outlook. There was a physical and spiritual similarity between him and the above described Heniek, the son of the chief-of-police. Srulek was well built. He didn’t pick on weaker kids, and he stood his ground against attackers, never using foul language. The neighbouring brothel left him completely unaffected. We never mentioned that institution in our conversations. He did well in school and loved Jewish culture.

After he finished elementary school, Srulek went to Łódź to become an apprentice at a bookbinder’s, I believe. He came home for a few days in the summer of 1939, grown up, powerfully built, happy with life in a big city. He told us how he was active in the elections to the city council, where the Polish Socialist Party together with the Bund and the Zionist Left were victorious; in a large city, the Bund was still a power to be reckoned with. Shortly afterward the war broke out.

In December 1945 I spent a few days in Łódź. I met an acquaintance from my town in the street, who had once been a poor grocer in a basement at Potters’ Square, and now was a demobilized platoon commander. He couldn’t part with his uniform decorated with two Crosses of Valour: perhaps because he looked so unlike a Maccabee he especially valued the incarnation the war bestowed upon him. The meeting was warm but brief. When I learned that Hampel had survived and lived in Łódź, I immediately made my way to the address I received.

Meeting survivors was usually joyous, for life had a special value when it was accompanied by an awareness of the thread on which it had hung not so long before. However, in the meeting with Hampel I wasn’t able to generate any joy. We sat by the wall of some printing-house, as Hampel finally worked in his profession. We said much but quietly, and what we weren’t able to express in words we expressed in silence.

In the first days of December 1939, the Jewish population of the town was deported to Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski. The Hampels were there with their entire family. Whether because some important factories were there, or simply because the commander was less blood-thirsty than elsewhere, people died more slowly than in other ghettos. But they did die and were starved. Mrs Hampel died first, and the others awaited their turn.
At Easter 1943 the news came of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Srulek informed his father that he would go to the uprising. ‘Do you have to go?’ ‘Papa, I have to!’ Old man Hampel hid his head in his hands: ‘If you have to go—go, I understand you!’

Since that moment all traces of Srulek have disappeared. I don’t know if he reached the burning ghetto, or died along the way, if he fell as an unavenged victim, or managed to shoot some Nazi.

All I know is that in my town there won’t be any street named after Izrael Hampel. Time erased all traces, the rains washed them away, who remembers, and who can remember that such a boy once lived there? And who cares? After all, he was a Jew. If the history of the Jews hasn’t become a part of the Polish consciousness by now, then it never will. In my own presence, their history has become something distant and unbelievable, as if it were the history of some Baltic tribe that vanished from these lands centuries ago. And were there a few young men like Hampel among the Poles? There wouldn’t be enough streets for them in the country. That street I keep inside me; I want it to exist because soon I won’t be here either. Izrael Hampel Street. One of the reasons why I overcame my resistance to writing.

I don’t know what he felt in his heart and mind, but I’ll try to imagine it. Srulek was not trapped in Warsaw. He could have survived, looking for help, and he should have thought of his father and siblings. From a rational point of view, what could he do alone, even armed with a carefully hidden and maintained handgun? Sway the balance of the war effort?

I look for the answer in the commandment that says we shouldn’t have other gods before the One. It wasn’t like Srulek to be a slave. And so did dignity become more important than the instinct for survival? The right to an honourable death: is this what the insurgents of the ghetto fought for? ‘The one who dies will be free.’ Polish Romanticism and the Jewish ethos merge into one. But who understands this! And will someone not feel offended—a Pole, a Jew?

From what the Jews created in pre-war Poland I feel the musical hits have best passed the test of time. A half-century later and even children, or older grandchildren, know them. The greatest popularity is accorded the still familiar, longing Jewish groans, Poor Rebecca or The Shtetl of Belz. Their popularity has transcended Polish borders, and sometimes I hear American or French versions.

Rebecca saw the world with the eyes of a woman who was passive, unable to participate in life. She could only be rescued by a miracle, brought to life by her dream lover arriving from another, non-Jewish world. Jewish maidens dreamed of their Prince Charming, porets in Yiddish, a derivative of the Latin princeps, or the German Prinz, or prince. In the modest dreams of the Jewish poor, the prince could be a doctor or merchant, or even the district gentry estate owner, or sometimes a state official who falls in love with the dark eyed little Jewess (Żydóweczka). Such a prince came for Hela, to take her to the palace gates, in other words to the district office. But she was an exception. In contrast to Hela, Rebecca of the song will experience failure and is aware of this fact. Her prince will not come, and she can only escape in her dreams, which, obviously, will not come true. After a couple of years the Germans will come, dreams will be eliminated, and Rebecca will be sent to the gas chambers.

The Little Shtetl of Belz is masculine, and the narrator demonstrates an active stance. Achieving success on his own, he didn’t wait for the world to come to him. People envy him and with reason. Perhaps he became a doctor, or opened a store in the Bronx, or most
probably entered the Warsaw bohemian world and wrote songs. He made his dreams come true but lost them on the way, as he no longer has anywhere to go or return to. In Jewish song hits there are no good solutions.

The question arises: why did Jewish songs win over an audience that didn’t like Jews? It can be proved that the Jewish fate was a concentrated version of the Polish one, Rebecca and the narrator returning to Belz expressed existentially what in the Polish fate was inherent in the practical sense. But might not this be one of the major sources of the disregard in which Jews were held, a kind of tactic based on the conviction that one is superior, less affected: an attempt at breaking a spell?

Everyone involved in the theatre knows that a kick in the rear end is a deed that signifies the genre and the rank of the character. The authors of a comedy don’t ask the kicked individuals how they feel; the former assume that the deed is justified and needed. But in life things can vary. I doubt if the fate of the Jews could have anything to do with justice, which did not hinder some of the witnesses from bursting with laughter. The audience didn’t notice that history was staging a different play, and that the comedy was transformed into a drama and then a tragedy. The audience couldn’t tell what they were watching and had mistaken the genre.

And it is because of the laughter that keeps ringing in my ears that I didn’t want to accept the tragic scope of human fate in general and my own in particular. That is why I allowed myself to be puffed up with stars, military orders, and my gun. And also with vodka savoured to the bottom. Your health! But it is the bottom that I was afraid to explore, even to look at.

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Translated from the Polish by Christopher Garbowski