

Kazimierz Laski¹

A Few Memories

The building on 11 Avenue Wolności (previously Kościuszki Street), with its two backyards, seemed very big to a child, whereas the janitor, Józef, armed with a large broom, seemed quite threatening. His power was seen in, among other things, when closing the gates to the public, his intervention was necessary in order to leave or return home. Obviously, such intervention necessitated sometimes waking Józef up, and hence required appropriate financial compensation. Due to the great purchasing power of the złoty and the low incomes, such compensation, if I remember correctly, did not go beyond 10-20 groszy.

Not long ago, I showed the building to my children and my grandchildren. I was surprised – let alone of what my family thought – how small this tenement was in reality and how very rundown it was. Our memory plays such tricks on us when, after decades, we return to places so well-known from the past and what we find is not quite what we were searching for.

My mother was an enterprising seamstress. She organised and ran a company manufacturing men's shirts. She employed around eight seamstresses and produced more or less sixty shirts daily. The workshop was in a large room on the first floor, whereas we lived on the second floor. The income from the company was not great, but it enabled us to lead a confident existence, even during the time of the Great Depression in the years 1929-1933. However, it is worth realising that, in those times, it meant a relative prosperity, especially in housing conditions. Our first apartment comprised one room and a kitchen, without a toilet; our second, which we occupied sometime in the mid-1930's, comprised two rooms and a kitchen, and did have a toilet. The family was made up of my parents, and two sons; moreover, a housekeeper lived with us, as my mother was very busy with the company. We did not have a bathroom and none of our friends at that time had a bathroom either. When I tell my children and grandchildren that I was actually brought up in an apartment without a toilet and that, in Poland, every winter there with frosty days with temperatures of minus twenty or even lower, they look at me in disbelief. How is it possible to drop your trousers – or lift your skirt – in such conditions? Apparently you can, since memories of such things have been written down. Perhaps, it might, sometimes, aid longevity.

As I already mentioned, we had permanent domestic help. They were country girls who, for a modest wage, looked after the home and lived with us. They probably took an active part in my upbringing, during the period when I was learning to talk. There is no

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other explanation for the fact that, I was the only one in my family to speak Polish without any accent. This circumstance was to play a not inconsiderable role in my future life.

I went to the elementary school, next to the church, on Katedralna Street. The school director was Mr. Kapuściński. Only Jew boys went to this school. The teachers were predominantly Polish, but there were a few Jewish female teachers. I don't think that, apart from the faith of its students, the school's curriculum differed from that taught in other elementary school in the city.

During the years 1934–1939, I attended junior high school and, later the Romuald Traugutt senior high school. Our director was Dominik Zbierski. The school applied the *numerus clausus*, and so the number of Jewish students could not exceed 10%. In reality, in our class, there were two of us among forty students – so only 5%. In pre-War Poland, there was no division between church and state. As a consequence, the lesson would begin with a prayer “When the dawn breaks ...”. On national holidays, the school took part in religious celebrations, sometimes on Jasna Góra – all this placed the non-believers in an embarrassing position from the outset. There was no open anti-Semitism at school. There was, however, a far-reaching isolation. I don't remember ever visiting any schoolfriend's home and no schoolfriend ever visited mine. However, we were not discriminated against in school. We were treated just like other students.

Our school gave us a fairly good education in mathematics, Latin and foreign languages (in my case, it was French, the majority took German, English was not taught). It was worse with the humanities subjects. Emphasis was placed on memorising facts, texts and events. Imagination, criticism of the knowledge passed on or the ability to think independently were not developed. Those shortcomings were, however, universal in those times, not only Poland, and I'm sure that the situation is much better in today's schools. I was not an outstanding student, but I was sufficiently self-reliant. In any case, no one at home was able to help me. Two extreme events lodged in my memory. I must have still been a small child when I learned to read and, then, the words “As” and “Ola” caused me no difficulty. However, within the later pages of the primer, polysyllables awaited me. I was convinced that I would never be able to read them. On the other hand, I remember that in the first class of junior high school, I was once able to solve a geometric problem of the type: “Prove that some statement is true on the basis of such and such assumptions”. For me it was a revelation that, on my own, I could prove something, that I could think independently and that I could reach certain outcomes independently. Perhaps it was a forecast that learning and scientific thought would, in the future, be my profession and passion.

My future wife, Irena Wolfowicz, was a student at the Juliusz Słowacki junior and senior high schools for girls. At this school, the situation of the Jewish minority was different than at Traugutt's. I don't know exactly how many Jews were in Irena's class, but there were considerably than in our's. Moreover, what is more important, the ethnic-

religious divisions were considerably weaker. There was a great deal of contact and friendship amongst the students which, shortly, would turn out to be exceedingly important. Without any exaggeration, it is possible to say that Jews, who could benefit from a certain amount of support in the non-Jewish world, had a considerably better chance of survival during the time of the approaching catastrophe than those who did not have such contacts at their disposal.

My family, on my mother's side, comes from Żarek. My beloved mother, Sara Rifka, a real Jewish "mama", for whom her children were her whole life, especially her little Benjamin, namely, the author of these words. My mother was the eldest daughter amongst eight siblings. My grandfather, Hersz, was a wood turner. Such craftsmen as he worked with wood and round (or rounded) furniture components, e.g. legs for tables or beds. My grandfather was also able to produce beautiful chess pieces. My grandparents lived at 2 Nadrzeczna Street. In the kitchen stood my grandfather's lathe, operated by foot using a long board. Across the tree rings of the wooden board you could see the imprint of my grandfather's legs. How many years do you have to press that board with your legs (across the tree rings) in order for your feet to leave such a deep indentation?!

The choice of occupation in that family was inordinately straightforward. Sons learned their trade from their father, so that they were all wood turners. The daughters, among them my mother, became seamstresses. During the inter-War period, turned furniture components went out of fashion. Instead, my uncles produced wooden toys for children, especially popguns, which shot out corks. The most important component of that toy was the noise which was emitted when the cork, under pressure, left the barrel. It is extremely doubtful that children, in the era of computers and computer games, would be interested in this type of toy.

My encounter with anti-Semitism took place, in a way, before my birth. My mother related that, in 1919, *Hallerczycy* (soldiers of General Haller with National Democrat sympathies) organised a pogrom in Częstochowa. My mother, with a three-year-old child in her arms, my older brother Majer, managed to escape them. If she hadn't, I would not have been born two years later.

My parents and wider family did not have personal contacts with the non-Jewish world. As stated previously, it proved to be a considerable burden in the fight for survival during the period of the forthcoming Holocaust, as shown by the example of my family and that of Irena's. Irena's whole family survived. Of my family, only I survived - and then only thanks to the contacts I have already mentioned. This is the appropriate place to mention the name of a heroic Częstochowianka - Zofia Wiewiorowska, nee Wróblewska - who played a not inconsiderable role in saving many Jews during the War, as Deputy Manager of *Dom Kobiet* (Women's House) on Leszno Street in Warsaw. Zofia was the aunt of Alinka Sebyła, Irenka's closest friend. Moreover, Zofia herself was a schoolfriend of Anna, Irenka's mother. Zofia was posthumously recognised as *Righteous Among the*

Nations and, together with her children Hanna and Wojtek, I had the honour to participate in the solemn commemoration in her honour, at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

I still recall how Częstochowa appeared, somewhat anecdotally, at the beginning of my university career in Austria. Namely, after being appointed Professor of Economic Theory at Johannes Kepler University in Linz, at the beginning of the 1970's, I was summoned to the Education Ministry in Vienna in order to establish my seniority. The first question related to my high school diploma. I explained that I didn't have one because, in 1939, I had just completed the first year at Romuald Traugutt Senior High School in Częstochowa and the War interrupted my education at secondary school level. The official accepted and understood my explanation. However he then asks why, after the ending of the fighting locally, which after all only lasted no more than a few weeks or months, did I not resume my education? I try to explain just what German occupation meant in Poland, but the official persists with the question because he can only calculate my seniority from the time of obtaining that high school diploma. When it becomes clear to me that the person with whom I am speaking has absolutely no idea of what it was like in Poland during the War, I explain to him that secondary education was eliminated even for non-Jewish youth. His question relating to me made no sense because, as a Jew, I was in an even worse position than non-Jewish young people. At that moment, the official interrupts me and asks me why didn't I tell him that I was a Jew? I replied that I saw no reason to mention it. He replied that, because I was certainly persecuted during the period of the War, that time should be counted towards my seniority. To that was added my years of study and my earlier work at the Main School of Planning and Statistics in Warsaw. The War years, the years of study and the years at the MSPSS, together, enabled me to commence work in Austria with sufficient seniority for almost full retirement benefits. At that time, professors retired at the age of 70, while I, at that time, had just turned 50. I mention this incident because it is characteristic of a lack of understanding what German occupation meant in Poland and because a lack of this understanding proved to be a fortunate paradox in my case. I don't know whether, if I had discovered that the period of wartime "racial" persecution would be counted by officials in Austria towards seniority, at least for university professors, that my interlocutor had a better insight into contemporary history.

