

Elżbieta Mundlak-Zborowska¹ – an Interview²

Your roots lie in a multi-generational family of Częstochowa Jews. Your great-grandfather, Chief Rabbi Nachum Asz, was a universally respected citizen of Częstochowa and the spiritual leader of the Jewish community in this city. What induced you to take on the laborious work of seeking out traces of the activity and contribution of members of your family to the development of the city, as well as of the whole Częstochowa Jewish community prior to the tragedy of the *Shoah*?

I retired after twenty five years of professional work and so had a lot of free time. My husband had died and my son was overseas. I decided to visit my brother, Andrzej Urbańczyk, in Poland. Together with my father, Marian, and mother, Wiktoria, they were my adoptive family during the time of occupation and in the first years after liberation. Andrzej introduced me to his wife. We talked a lot and I asked him about our shared childhood.

One day, Andrzej stated that I had to meet someone. That person was Elżbieta, wife of the great poet and writer Jerzy Ficowski. I rang her and we arranged to meet during my next visit to Poland. That was perhaps in 1996. In the summer of 1997, in “Kawiarnia Literacka” on Krakowski Przedmieście in Warsaw, I met Elżbieta Ficowska, her husband Jerzy Ficowski, as well as Renata Skotnicka-Zaidman. I remember that it was an unusually hot day. Elżbieta, Renata and I were wearing large hats which protected us against the sun. We talked for a very long time. Elżbieta and Renata told me about the *Children of the Holocaust Association* and its activity, as well as stories of Jewish children, such as me, who had survived the Second World War. They described the education program that they conducted in schools and in various types of educational institutions.

It was then that I understood that I wanted to learn about the history of my lost Jewish family and I involved myself in their work. I knew that it wouldn't be easy. I had to begin somewhere. I travelled to Israel to gather material about Częstochowa. There, I met two women who, during a holiday in Ciechocinek, had met Danuta Marzec of Częstochowa. Danuta happened to be in Israel gathering information about Korczak. She was working at the Higher Pedagogic School of Częstochowa (now the Jan Długosz Academy) and knew people who were researching the history of the Jews in that city. During my visit to Częstochowa, she introduced me to two researchers - Zbigniew Jakubowski and Jerzy Mizgalski, with whom I began to work on reconstructing my family's history.

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² Interview conducted by Magdalena Mizgalska in May 2010r.

In the documentary film, “A Lesson From History: I Was Lucky”, you made a short, but dramatic, synthesis of events which revolved around a child survivor and her family. You left viewers of the film with a significant message for future generations – Human life is the most valuable and the value of humanity determines the particular importance of one’s relationship to another person when that person is in need. Did the idea for that message arise before, or during the course of, studying the documentary material and working on the script?

The whole film was one, big improvisation. There was no script. I walked around places connected with the history of my family and talked about them. There was no strict plan. Sometimes, some shots arose quite spontaneously – on the spur of the moment and through my emotions at the time.

This film is also a response to the most difficult question in the history of mankind: Does a man have the right to take another’s life in the name of ideology, religion or political goals? It is a protest against all expressions of racism, intolerance and xenophobia. It is a warning and a message to us, the second post-Holocaust generation. Do you agree with my interpretation of this film?

This film, above all, pays tribute to the nobility and goodness of people. Is it a warning? Yes, to not submit to evil and to not allow yourself to be “beastialised”. After all, during World War II, people could have yielded to the words, “Run and get the house abandoned by the Jews ...”. But, despite that, there were people who decided to save Jews while, at the same time, risking their own lives.

During the War, people became accustomed to crime and violence committed right before their eyes. They became accustomed to death which they witnessed every day. For that reason, they stopped sympathising with the suffering and the dying. They stopped reacting to all the signs of persecution. They were simply indifferent. It was that indifference which destroyed people during the War.

Therefore, we cannot today be indifferent towards any racist graffiti in the street and on walls. It doesn’t matter to which people it refers. What is important is that a lack of rapid intervention or not painting them over is evidence of indifference. We must not make the mistakes of our ancestors! We have to avoid those mistakes. For that reason, this film is both a warning and a call to intervene against any signs of racism.

What was your relationship with your Polish family who hid you during the Nazi occupation, with your biological mother and what was your post-War fate?

I found my way into the wonderful Polish family of Wiktoria and Marian Urbańczyk. I felt very loved and connected to them. After four years in their home, my biological mother turned up. It was a surprise. My Polish parents never counted on such an eventuality. They had adopted me as an orphan. In the meantime, we’d become close. In the beginning, Wiktoria and Marian suggested to my biological mother that we live

together and become one family. However, they quickly understood that that experiment wouldn't succeed. It was not so easy. I didn't remember my mother. She was a stranger to me. Victoria suggested that my mother visit us again in half a year's time. She was introduced to me as an aunt. In the beginning, taking walks with my biological mother, I sensed the strangeness of the situation. Gradually, I got to know her and became used to her presence. Of course, it was very difficult for my Polish parents to part with me. Fortunately, they were noble people. They understood that they still had a son, Andrzej. My biological mother had no one else except me.

Coming back to the fate of the Jewish girl hidden by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Częstochowa, and then by the Polish Zieliński family, when did you become aware of your own Jewish origins? It must have been difficult returning to “normality” after those traumatic experiences. How did your mother try to organise her life in post-War Poland? Where did you live? What work did your mother and step-father do? Where did you go to school in Poland? Did your schoolfriends know you were Jewish? Were you involved in the attempts to rebuild Jewish post-War culture, tradition and identity?

After the War, my mother married Julian Ritterman, who came from an old, well-known Jewish family in Kraków. Together, they settled in Opole. After the War, my step-father, Julian (whom I called “dad”), was the chief designer of a cement plant in Poland. The headquarters of the Cement Industry Office was in Kraków. I attended primary school in Opole. My sister was born a few years later. My father was transferred to the head office in Kraków. My father felt that he was valued by his colleagues, particularly by the young engineers who often admired him and his creativity. Dad also participated in various research activities run by the University of Mining and Metallurgy (*Akademia Górniczo-Hutnicza*) and contributed to the “*Cement, Lime & Plaster*” monthly. Despite having had a lot of professional experience and a good job (she worked in the consulate in Switzerland), my mother had to stop working. She looked after the home and, in particular, my sister, who had allergies and was frequently sick.

My parents didn't belong to the Jewish community. My father never took me to the Jewish cemetery in Kraków. He never showed me the graves of his ancestors, despite the fact that, almost daily, I passed the cemetery on Miodowa Street on my way to school – which was on the same street. It was run by the Society of Friends of Children (*Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci*) and there was no importance attached there to the teaching of religion. My parents were friends with Jews, but also with Catholics. I remember a situation which was troublesome for me. One day, some Catholic friends visited me at my home and, looking around my room, they asked, “Where is the photo from your First Holy Communion?” I was struck dumb, completely not knowing what to

say. At that time in Poland, attitudes varied towards the Church – there were those who didn't go, communists and others. For that reason, my friends believed that I was an atheist. At home, we didn't talk about our Jewish origins. I have the feeling that my parents were avoiding the issue. They wanted to protect me and my sister. We didn't participate in Jewish cultural and religious life. We were distanced from organised Jewishness. In Kraków, I went to the high school on Michałowski Street. Prior to my matriculation year, we emigrated to Venezuela.

The decision to change one's place of residence is never easy, especially a decision to emigrate from Poland. What determined that decision, the timing and the country of destination?

When he was forty six years old, my father had a heart attack. He thought that, on account of his health, life and work, he would stay in Kraków forever. Admittedly, the majority of his friends had left Poland. In 1957, he still didn't think about it. I suppose, on account of his health, he was afraid to emigrate. Unfortunately, in that shameful year of 1957, one morning in his office, under the glass on his desk, he found a photograph of Korczak, on whom sidelocks had been drawn. That same day, after he returned home from work, he decided that we were leaving and applied for a visa to Venezuela. He had a brother there who had been pressuring us to come. We also applied for a visa to Australia, where my dad had cousins and brothers of the Rittermans from Kraków. They were also persuading him to emigrate.

That was probably at the beginning of 1957. The visas came while we were on holiday in Sopot. We decided to go to Venezuela. We returned quickly to Kraków and, with two suitcases, we left Poland. Our apartment was taken over by new immigrants from the Soviet Union, who bought our furniture, piano, etc. Earlier, my mother had packed a large crate with my father's professional library and with domestic necessities such as crockery, kitchen utensils, kitchen towels, etc. We bought four tickets on Air France, with a month's stopover in Paris, because there were no seats available to Venezuela any earlier. We left as the "Zieliński" family, which was my mother's wartime surname. My father also took on this surname and adopted me when I was six years old. He called himself "Julian Zieliński-Rittermann", because "Rittermann" was on his diplomas.

Our stay in Paris was quite modest, paid for by the brother of Zygmunt's father. For us, it was paradise, even though, for two weeks, my parents had Asian flu. No one in the hotel was to find out about the illness; otherwise they would have thrown us out. Everyday, I strolled around Paris with my sister. It was wonderful. My parents had antibiotics which they got from a doctor friend in Paris, and recovered. I had had that flu shortly before leaving Poland. It scared my parents as they thought it was polio. There happened to be an epidemic at the time. Fortunately, imported Terramicina, and given to me by a nurse friend, helped me. As a result, my parents already knew what medicine to ask for in Paris.

My parents, my sister Daniela (who was 8 years old at the time) and I (16 years old), landed at the airport in Maiquetia by the sea, half an hour away from Caracas. It was the beginning of November 1957. My father was 50 years old, my mother was 46. While still in Poland, the doctor had warned my father that his heart would not withstand the tropics and that he should not leave. My father decided that what will be, will be. But he had to extract his children from Poland. Sooner or later, someone would remind them that, as Tuwim wrote, they “were not locals”.

My father lived for another twenty years in Venezuela. He was a respected professor at the University of Caracas. He died young, at the age of 69. At the time, he was at the height of his professional creativity. He would repeat that these were his most wonderful years, even though he had had a beautiful youth. He had achieved a lot as a young man: Polish freestyle swimming champion and, with “Maccabi Kraków”, multiple Polish water polo championships. He played on that team with his brother, Zygmunt, and with two cousins. Altogether, there were four Ritterman’s in the one team. He studied engineering in Prague, Czechoslovakia, due to the *numerous clausus*, and had a good time there. He was also a skiing champion. In summary, he had a wonderful life before the War. Even so, though, to him, Venezuela was like paradise.

Settling into a new place presents new problems connected with organising one’s everyday life, adapting to the environment and finding one’s place in the local community. Did you encounter any kindness or help from the Jewish community in your new country?

From an objective point of view, the beginnings in Venezuela were not easy. The climate, the friendly people and, at that time, the complete lack of anti-Semitism, was all wonderful for us. Leaving was the best decision my parents could have made. They gave me and my sister a chance at a free life. We met many friendly people. My uncles belonged to the Jewish community. Shortly after arriving, I met a young man, four years older than me, who studied mechanical engineering in New York. His name was Aleksander Mundlak. He came from Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki. Together with his parents, he had survived the War on Aryan papers. I was 20 years old when we were married. A month later, we had our religious wedding under a *chuppah*.

You achieved professional and education successes. You attained a university degree and worked as a researcher and teacher. Can you say a few words on that subject?

In my home, people who had achieved educational success had always been valued. My dad wanted me to follow in his footsteps. He’d say, “An engineer will always find work in any country.” I’ll never forget the time when, at some meeting shortly after arriving in Venezuela, a well-respected Venezuelan engineer asked my father, “Is it true that you are a Jew?” My father was, at first, taken aback and replied that he was. That

respected and important engineer then said, “You know, I’m descended from Spanish Marrano-Jews who fled from the Inquisition and I’m very proud of that”. My father returned home from that meeting and said emotionally, “You won’t believe what happened to me today....” After completing my Masters in chemistry, I was accepted into his Department of Mechanical Engineering, as an assistant. I studied thermodynamics. As a chemical engineer, I was well prepared for that subject. For years, my father and I worked in the same office and, every day at 11:00am, we would go for a black coffee. He was in the habit of saying, “This work is good for the elderly and for women with children”. Indeed, as a mother, I was very pleased that I had long holidays. When my father died, following a prostate operation (he had an embolism), I never again returned to our office. I roamed around various offices at the university. Shortly after, with my family, I left to spend four years in New York, where I had received a scholarship from the University. It completely covered the cost of my doctorate in Environmental Engineering.

Returning to Jewish traditions is a return to the culture and to the religion. For over 40 years, your great-grandfather, Chief Rabbi Nachum Asz, was a spiritual leader. How did your attitudes to tradition and to religious life evolve?

The Jewish family, within which I grew up, was not very religious. In Poland, I never went to a Jewish school. From the time of my wedding to my first husband, Aleksander, and later to Eli Zborowski, I have learned more and more about Judaism.

During the course of working on your documentary film, you returned to Poland and to Częstochowa. What impression did Poland and Częstochowa make on you after so many years? In creating the documentary, what attitudes did you encounter from today’s Częstochowa residents?

As far as Częstochowa is concerned, I had no scale of comparison. I was born here and lived here as an infant, so I don’t remember anything about this city. Everything fascinated me – the warmth and enthusiasm of the people I met, the developed cultural life, e.g. the Huberman competition, the wonderful and talented artists of the Higher Pedagogic School, as well as their professional equipment and studios. With their help, the “Jews of Częstochowa” exhibition was able to be organised. The kindness and work of the Director of the Częstochowa State Archives, Elżbieta Surmy-Jończyk, enabled historical documents, exceedingly important to Częstochowa Jews, to be included in the exhibition.

