

## **My Departure and Return to Poland** **by Sigmund Rolat**

**Following the tragic period of the Holocaust, as a young boy with tremendously traumatic experiences, you face some practical challenges. What do you do with your life now? What information did you have about the fate of your family, those closest to you, your friends and acquaintances?**

In my case, I actually knew what had happened to members of my family and to my friends. None of them had left before the outbreak of war to, for example, the Kresy or other areas later occupied by the USSR - even though there was a greater probability of surviving the *Shoah* there. In January 1945, I knew that my parents, my brother Jerzyk, my uncle Szydłowski, together with his whole family, had lost their lives. I knew exactly who of my friends had been murdered and who had been sent to Treblinka.

**What contributed to your making the decision to leave Poland?**

This is a very important question. My response to it is bound up in elaborating on a few issues. They concern numerous events over many years. They relate not only to me as an individual, but also to other people who left Poland over the 2-3 year period following the end of the War.

In my case, I was a 14 year old boy. I was liberated on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1945. I was liberated by the Red Army from horrendous German captivity. It was such that few Jews in Poland managed to escape from it with their lives. I saw my liberators in a different light from that of a large section of Poles. Later experience, connected with the Soviet occupation of all of us – Poles, Jews, followers of Christianity and Judaism - was not as tragic as that of the German occupation. For that reason, as a boy, I and the liberated Jews saw, in the Red Army soldiers, immense heroes fighting, avenging the loss of millions, in order to defeat the Nazis.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1945, I was euphoric. I was free. I could go wherever I wanted to go, I could do whatever I wanted to do. I could watch films in the cinema – even twice a week. From the very beginning of the War, Jews were forbidden from going to the cinema or to attend school. As a 9 year old boy at the start of the War, not being able to go to school was

not the greatest of all tragedies. But to not be able to go to the cinema was total misery. Now you can understand what I was feeling at the moment of the liberation of Częstochowa. There was only one cinema and, everyday, it showed the Russian film “Chapayev”. The other film that it was possible to watch was “The North Star” (known as “Armoured Attack” in the USA). Somehow, they managed to bring in this American film which told the story of Germany’s 1941 invasion of Russia.

In those first days following liberation, I saw the Germans mainly as corpses, as prisoners-of-war being led along by the Russian army or in burnt-out German tanks on the streets of Częstochowa. Unfortunately, that euphoria was short-lived. We weren’t able to return to the *status quo ante* by just the first or second day. In general, the Jews were not received enthusiastically by their Polish fellow-citizens. Sometimes, the response varied between greater and lesser anger. Our apartment was now the home of other Polish people - Christians. They now considered that apartment as their property. In my case, the one person close to me, who had survived the War, the occupation and *Hasag*, was my Aunt Róża. Before the War, she had a beautiful apartment at No.19 Garibaldi Street, which had been taken over by other inhabitants of the city. Of course, my parents’ apartment at No.6 Aleja also had new residents. The one place where we could go was the factory which my uncle had before the War on Krótka Street. We sheltered there for a few weeks. After a certain time, my aunt and uncle moved to Katowice, and I followed them there. I lived together with my uncle and aunt. It should be remembered that, at the time, the issue was not just where would we live, but also how we would support ourselves?

One of the greatest issues for me to solve after liberation was going to school. In September 1939, I was supposed to begin fourth grade at the public school. During the occupation, clandestine classes were taught by, for example, the teacher Madzia Chorowicz, her sister and other teachers, who organised a kind of primitive, public school at No.6 Aleja. That clandestine education lasted for a year and a half. It could only continue until such time as it became life-threatening. Under normal circumstances, by 1945, I would have already been in the fourth grade of high school. After the War, I was totally unprepared to continue my education at that level. I needed some very intensive tutoring. In Poland, this was hard to obtain. The situation became further complicated by Aunt Róża and her husband’s departure for the American zone in Germany where they prepared for emigration to the USA.

In those first post-War years, Jews in Poland actually had two possibilities. One was to remain in Poland and to rebuild a normal life. I considered myself amongst that group. I thought that I would remain in Poland and that I would study. I would spend my life here. After a few months, I began to think differently. Why? Firstly, I didn't have the possibility for further studies. Secondly, I began to feel as though I was not in my own country. I felt like a stranger amongst my own people. I don't know whether I felt like a foreigner at the time – maybe not. But, certainly, I didn't feel “at home”.

The other possibility was emigration. The only question was - where to? There were two possible directions – Palestine, where it was intended to establish an independent Jewish state or to the USA. It wasn't easy. The United States had imposed limitations on immigration. Many people had to wait two, three or even four years before obtaining permission to travel to the USA. From Poland, people often chose to go to western Europe or to more distant countries in South America, to Australia and the like. I left Poland for France where I remained for a few months. I attended school there. My aspiration to continue my education encountered a problem. I couldn't go into the class which was appropriate for my age. After all, I'd lost many years' worth of my education during the War. But, here, my Aunt Róża helped me a lot. She found a retired Munich University professor, Eugen Zipp. It was he who, through eighteen months of intensive tutoring, prepared me for the matriculation examination at a German high school. In Poland, today, that type of high school would be called a *lyceum*. In December 1947, in Germany, I obtained my matriculation. One month later, I left for the United States which had formed a special “US Committee for European Children”. Through this committee, over and above the established immigration limits, children orphaned during the War, not only Jewish children, could come and benefit from the American community's generous help to continue their education. That's the reason, as frankly as I can explain it, as to why I left Poland after the War.

**After World War II, Europe and the world were still full of uncertainties. Your country choice of destination and even the road you took to that destination involved overcoming many dangers and difficulties. As a young Jewish boy from Częstochowa, whose help could you count upon?**

The help I received from my aunt Róża in finding the German professor was very important to me. Professor Eugen Zipp became one of the heroes of my life. It's ironic that I owe my

life and fate to two Germans. The fact that, today, I'm even alive is due to Director Lüth, who took me to "Hasag". It was a last minute decision. I was standing in a group of young boys designated to be transported to the cemetery where mass shootings of Jews took place. Together with that whole group, he took me to the "Hasag Pelcery" labour camp. Later, even during a selection in July 1943, Director Lüth indeed argued for our lives with the German SS. If not for Director Lüth, I would have been dead before my thirteenth birthday.

However, it was Professor Eugen Zipp who, in preparing me for matriculation, made it possible for me to complete my studies in the United States. You need to remember that that man slogged away for six, maybe seven days a week. I would meet him in his apartment six times a week. On average, I'd spend five hours with him and, while I returned home, he had to prepare for the next classes with me. Our basic language was German. In that language, he passed on his knowledge of German literature, he taught mathematics, algebra, geometry and, from basics, Latin. In order to matriculate, it was obligatory to know one foreign language. I chose French. Moreover, I had to prepare for history, geography and the like.

In 1946, there were no textbooks. In his German gothic style, the Professor wrote out the knowledge that was essential to my education. I still have his handwritten textbooks stored away somewhere. If I was spending an average of 5 hours a day with him, then he had to have been spending at least 5-6 hours longer, not just during the week, but on Sundays too, preparing those classes for me.

**The first country that you stayed in after you left Poland was France. Did you understand French?**

No, but apparently I had a certain gift for languages. I left Poland with a group of religious Jews from "Poale Aguda Israel". Their aim was to settle in Palestine. Leaving with them was easier than with another group of Jews. They had stronger financial support from American Jews than did other Jewish groups. From Poland, we travelled to France through Czechoslovakia. After their arrival in France, groups were taken to a mansion which had been bought or rented 50 kilometres from Paris, where they were prepared for emigration to Palestine. After two or three months, I left the group that I'd come with, when that group was due to continue on the next stage of its journey to the future State of Israel. From that place near Paris, I decided to get to Munich as, in the meantime, aunt Róża had made contact with

me. She informed me that she had found a tutor for me - Professor Eugen Zipp. Until the time of making contact with the Professor and leaving for Munich, I was in a youth orphanage. I absorbed French quickly there. I learned that language for around 3-4 months.

**You said that classes with Professor Eugen Zipp took place in the German language. When you left Poland, did you understand German?**

Every Jew who survived the German occupation of Poland could speak German - some better, some worse. Also, remember that, generally, Jews could speak Yiddish. I was one of those who only started to learn that language in Hasag. Religious Jews or those who were older considered it as their first language. Their knowledge of Polish wasn't exactly 100 per cent. My everyday language was Polish. Before the War, the more progressive a Jew was, the better his knowledge of Polish. For example, in the 1930's, at least 50% of Jews attended Polish schools. Jews who understood Yiddish could more easily learn the German language. Basic words in Yiddish are related to German. That group of Jews who knew Yiddish, while they could not speak German properly, they could at least make themselves understood to Germans. As far as I was concerned, my father spoke German and taught me that language. When I got to Hasag, my German wasn't bad. Following my stay in France, I could also speak French relatively well. My biggest problem after my arrival in the USA was the English language. But I somehow managed to overcome that too.

**What problems did you encounter after arriving in the United States?**

Speaking completely honestly, I didn't have any difficulties in the United States. From the very beginning, to me, the United States was paradise. Even when, on my second day there, \$8 was stolen from me, I took it as a joke even though, for me, it represented a great loss. America, for me, was love at first sight.

**After your departure for the United States, when was your first visit to Poland?**

I came to Poland for the first time with my children in 1967. It was just before the bar mitzvah of my son, Jeffrey. I considered then, and I consider now, that they should know where their father was born and where their ancestors lived. The Czestochowa cemetery is of special significance to me. It's not the usual Jewish cemetery where you can visit the graves of

grandparents, uncles or friends. During the War, it was a killing-field. My brother's execution took place at this cemetery. He was the youngest of a group of Jewish partisans. He was 18 years old. My mother, after a selection in the Hasag camp, lost her life there too.

**What has Zygmunt Rolat, a Jew from Częstochowa, done to pass on, to younger generations, the truth about the tragedy of the Holocaust?**

Why, for example, did I decide to create "The Jews of Częstochowa" exhibition? First of all, my ties to Poland and my Polish citizenship still remain deep in my heart. One can say that I am an American Jew and that I am a Polish Jew. Of course, I'm a Jew with American citizenship. But Poland is my homeland, and Częstochowa is my little homeland. When I began travelling to Poland, my links to the country strengthened even more. I recognised this as a normal identification with the country of one's origin. I saw, in the USA, many examples of where people had lost the ties with their country of origin. An example of this could be my cousin, Alan. I'm very proud of the fact that I succeeded in convincing him to participate in the creation of the exhibition. This project was not meant to be just for us, but also for our children and grandchildren. My children and grandchildren continue to be interested in travelling to Poland and in understanding the history of the *Shoah*. Many children of those people, who left Poland, now visit Poland during the "March of the Living". They only visit the "triangle of death" - Oświęcim, Treblinka and Majdanek. Of course, young Polish Jews should also see those places. But that was only one of the chapters in the history of Polish Jews (even though it was so terrible). They should know a lot more of our beautiful 1,000 year history. America made it possible for me to return as a person able to help with the rebuilding of Jewish life in this country and with the telling of our history.

As the date approached for the opening of "The Jews of Częstochowa" exhibition, I decided to organise the first meeting of Częstochowa Jews since World War II. That Reunion, held between 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2004, was intended specifically for people to meet, talk and remember. On banners, hung on the Aleja Najświętszej Marii Panny, were written the words, "*The Jews of Częstochowa – Days of Remembrance*". More than two hundred people came to Częstochowa then. They were Częstochowa Jews and their descendants living in various countries – the USA, Canada, South America and Israel. They arrived from many European countries and even from far-off Australia. For the first time since World War II, a broad-scale

cultural event had been organised precisely to promote the ideal of “building bridges” – bridges between Poles and Jews and also, perhaps above all, between generations of *Częstochowian*, both Poles and Jews, who were born after the Holocaust.

During the preparation of the “Days of Remembrance”, I’d describe the people of the city as being, in short, curious and immensely interested. Already during the preliminary work, I was informed that discussions, about the past, were taking place within both Jewish and Polish circles. There was a growth in interest in literature and films on Jewish subjects. We understood that we needed to respond to this demand. We wanted to widen knowledge about the role of the Jewish community in the development of the city, as well as to bring, particularly young Poles, closer to the tragic events of the Holocaust.

We organised an academic conference - “The Jews of Częstochowa: Co-existence - Holocaust – Remembrance”. I’d like to mention here that, at a meeting together with my cousin Alan Silberstein, Professor Jerzy Mizgalski suggested a working title for the exhibition - “The Jews in Częstochowa”. Straight away, I said that I didn’t like that title. To me, it was associated with a beautifully illustrated book that I’d looked at in Empik only a few days earlier entitled “The Swedes in Warsaw”. After all, we Jews were never a foreign element in Częstochowa. For that reason, we settled on “The Jews of Częstochowa” as the name for our exhibition.

The principal organiser of the conference of the Higher Pedagogic School of Częstochowa (now known as the *Jan Długosz Academy of Częstochowa*). The academic papers and memoirs which were delivered during the conference added to the knowledge of events which took place more than seventy years ago. They also brought the current generation closer to a picture of the city in which Jews represented one-third of its inhabitants.

There was also the premiere of my autobiographical, documentary film, “As If It Was Yesterday ...” directed by M. Nekanda–Trepki. It is the first documentary in which much is devoted to the life of the Częstochowa ghetto and to the young prisoners of the Hasag camp in Częstochowa. The book published at the time, “The Jews of Częstochowa: Co-existence - Holocaust – Remembrance” is already, today, a collector’s item.

The greatest impression, not only on the participants of that first Reunion of Częstochowa Jews and their descendants, but also on the people of the city, was “The Jews of

Częstochowa” exhibition which went on display in the Museum of Częstochowa pavilion in Staszica Park. The most pleasant surprise for me was when that exhibition was voted “The Cultural Event of the Year” in an annual public opinion poll. The exhibition “The Jews of Częstochowa” was acknowledged by the people of Częstochowa and was awarded a statuette which travelled with the exhibition as it moved through many cities in the USA and Canada.

During the Second Reunion of Częstochowa Jews, held between 9th and 12th October 2006, over two hundred Jews and their descendants again came to Częstochowa. What made the greatest impression on the Reunion participants, on the people of the city and on American television and press, was the *sukkah*. It was the first *sukkah* to be built in Częstochowa in sixty four years. Under the supervision of Rabbi Schudrich, it was erected on the grounds of the Jacek Malczewski Graphic Arts High School. For me and for the Reunion participants, it was a great experience. We were all extremely moved. We saw something totally unexpected in either Częstochowa or in Poland – one hundred or more students, young Poles, becoming so interested in building the *sukkah*, that they accomplished something that was thought to be impossible. You had to experience it, not just see it. You had to see the enthusiasm with which those students built and decorated that *sukkah*.

I received an interesting telephone call from Australia. A teacher at a Jewish school asked whether her students could prepare decorations for the *sukkah*. Of course, I agreed. Shortly after, I received further calls from other Jewish schools who had heard of this undertaking in Częstochowa. The calls came from Paris, Haifa, San Francisco and Toronto. We also received some beautiful ornaments from the Salomon Szechter School in New Jersey where my grandson, Henry, and his classmates made beautiful, colourful paper chains. The *sukkah* was adorned with the children’s drawings and artwork. For us, it was an eloquent symbol of victory over violence and genocide, as well as a symbol of the continuation of the first, second and third post-Holocaust generations. The children’s work was a symbol on that continuation.

The eating, in that *sukkah*, of kosher meals brought from Warsaw by Rabbi Schudrich, was an experience, not only for the Jews, but for the guests eating kosher food for the first time – residents of Częstochowa. I said, at the time, “We’re pleased that we’re with you, even though it’s sad for us that so few Częstochowa Jews remain. We’re happy that we’re here, in the biggest *sukkah* in Poland and, maybe today, the biggest in the whole world”.



## **What were the reactions in those countries where news of your activities had reached?**

Unfortunately, they varied. I don't know if it was due to the influence of those tragic events of 1945-46 when Jews, returning to their homes, encountered considerable hostility. A considerable proportion of Jews also remember events during the war period and those terrible, ruthless activities of the *szmalcownicy* (blackmailers). However, I want to say that these were more the exception. A considerable section of people were indifferent to the fate of the Jews. There was also a significant group who saved Jews and, today, are recognised by Yad Vashem. However, the act of planting a memorial tree does not tell the whole tragic and heroism of these people.

I told you how I love Denmark and the Danes for saving 99% of the Danish Jews. Upon returning, mainly from Sweden, their homes were waiting for them, cleaned and with bouquets of flowers on the table. I stress that a Dane, who saved the life of a Danish Jew, has the same tree planted in his honour as does a Pole. But, after all, a Dane who saved a Jew didn't risk his life to the same extent as did a Pole. We're talking here of an issue that I would call a "scale of risk". Both took some risk, but the extent of that risk was different. What would have happened if the Germans had discovered a Jew being hidden by a Dane? Those Jews would have been led to the railway station and been sent to an extermination camp. The Dane would have probably been sent to jail for a year or two, and nothing would have happened to his family. Compare that situation with the one in Poland. When Pole hid a Jew in the attic, if the Germans had have found him, then not only the Jew and his host, but also the host's whole family would have been shot in front of their house. Here, you can see the "scale of risk". Too few people know about or remember it. The current generation needs to be told about these facts and about the "scale of risk". Less is spoken about Vichy, Quisling and that Anne Frank lost her life through Dutch denunciation.

Unfortunately, many times in America, too often I come across people who only remember the worst. They don't know or don't want to know things that were good and wonderful. Jews lived in Poland for centuries. During the Inquisition, expelled from Spain, they found shelter here. They were invited and received by Polish kings. The Kalisz Decree, the attitude of Kazimierz the Great towards the Jews or the decree signed by Jan Sobieski are well known. Look at how much Jews achieved in Poland – the Baal-Shem Tov, the Shulchan Aruch,

Haskala Judaism, Hassidism, etc. Even the State of Israel was established mainly by Polish Jews. How can one not be proud of that?

### **How would you describe your identity?**

As far as identity is concerned, I've had very many friendly altercations on this subject. I completely disagree with opinions about Jewish nationality. I have never considered myself as a Jew. I always described myself as a Polish Jew. I was a citizen of the Polish state who was of the Jewish faith, similar to my neighbours who Poles of the Catholic or Orthodox faith. If my father had have served in the army, he would have not been fighting for a Jewish Republic, but for Poland. After all, Berek Joselewicz formed a regiment of the Polish cavalry which fought under the Polish flag.

My family and I never considered ourselves to be of any other nationality. We maintained that we were Poles of Jewish origin. I remember how, on 12th May 1935, when our beloved Marshall Józef Piłsudski died, there was great mourning in our home. We were Poles of the Jewish faith, just like our neighbours were Poles of the Catholic or Evangelical faith. I'm a Jew with American citizenship, just as my parents had Polish citizenship, and our small homeland was Częstochowa. As a Jew, I am strongly, emotionally connected with Israel, the homeland for many generations of Jews living in that country.

### **What message for future generations in the 21st Century, as well as for your own children and grandchildren, would you like to pass on, as someone whose activity in life is connected with building respect for the traditions and religions of other peoples?**

I realised that I was not a typical Holocaust survivor in that I have, in my mind, happy memories of Poland from before German occupation. I often say that, in my later years, I've become a builder, building bridges of reconciliation. I've managed to accumulate resources which enable me to create them. Bridges enable my children and grandchildren, as well as Jewish and Polish youth, to meet together while getting acquainted with the history and traditions of a multicultural Polish state. We have lived here together, both in good times and in bad. Jews fought here for Poland. They were the engine- room for industry, factories and culture.

My greatest dream is to revive Jewish life in Częstochowa and in the whole of Poland. Evidence of the realisation of these dreams is my commitment to the building of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. It will be a reference point for everyone interested in the legacy of Polish Jews as well as a sign that relations between Poles and Jews have reached a turning point. It will also become a place of meeting and discussion for people who wish to better understand past and contemporary Jewish culture, for people who wish to fight stereotyping, xenophobia and nationalistic prejudice. The Museum will be a place for the promotion of openness, tolerance and truth.

**Interview conducted by Magdalena Mizgalska in September 2010.**



**From left: Yitzhak Asulin (Zygmunt Rolat's son-in-law), Zygmunt Rolat, Jeffrey Rolat (Zygmunt Rolat's son) and Henry Asulin (Zygmunt Rolat's grandson), at the grave of Jewish Partisans, where lies Jerzyk Rozenblat, Zygmunt Rolat's only brother (born. 5th April 1924 - died 19th March 1943). Czestochowa, 20th October 2009**





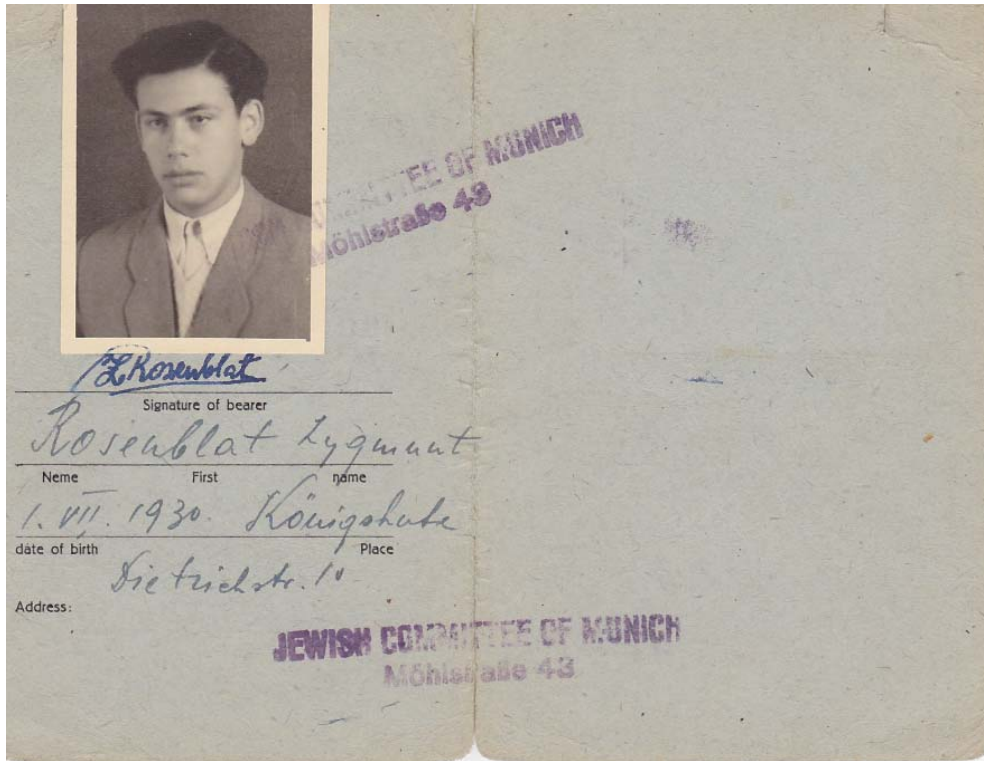
**From left: Henry Asulin (Zygmunt Rolat's grandson), Jeffrey Rolat (Zygmunt Rolat's son), Zygmunt Rolat, Samantha Rolat-Asulin (Zygmunt Rolat's daughter), Yitzhak Asulin (Zygmunt Rolat's son-in-law), Michael Berkowitz, Lea Wolinetz (Executive Director, World Society of Częstochowa Jews and Their Descendants) , Alan Silberstein (Zygmunt Rolat's cousin) during a commemoration at the Ghetto Heroes Square. Częstochowa, 20th October 2010**



From left:: Jeffrey Rolat and Samantha Rolat-Asulin, Zygmunt Rolat's children, during a ceremony unveiling and memorial plaque on the building of the former Hasag Pelcery labour camp. Częstochowa, 20 X 2009







Zygmunt Rolat's papers during his time in Munich.

## Zygmunt Rolat's Genealogy

