

Alan Silberstein – an Interview

I was born after WWII and raised as an only child, overshadowed by the presence of my two dead brothers, victims of the Holocaust. The most important events in my life took place before my birth, as it happened for many other Jews who call themselves “second generation Holocaust survivors”. Growing up, all these events were simply referred to as “der milkhome, which is Yiddish for “the war.” At the time, we did not call it “Holocaust” or “Shoah”. It was simply called “the war.” For a long time I did not know what exactly happened during the war, but I knew this was a catastrophe that changed everything. I knew that “our war” was not the same as the one my American friends from school discussed. Many of them had parents or relatives who had fought in the American armed forces during WWII. “Their war” was the war where brave American men left their homes, fought bravely and were victorious. “Our war,” on the contrary, was an overwhelming conflagration during which everything of value, and almost everyone we cared about, was lost. I did not try to discuss what I knew about “der milkhome” with my American classmates. They could not possibly understand. I did not need to discuss our war with my fellow immigrant second generation survivors. They understood; and there was nothing to be said.

How did you learn about your parents’ war stories?

For a long time I did not dare to ask my parents about their experiences during the war in Nazi-occupied Poland. I felt that talking about this part of their lives was too painful for them; and, it was too overwhelming for me to understand. All I knew was that it was a catastrophe during which my family and their friends experienced inhumane suffering. They were forced to make decisions no human being should ever be forced to make. However, their wartime experiences were always in the background. Perhaps something I did reminded them of one of my brothers. Or, they would comment that someone they saw resembled a Nazi guard they remembered. Once, I recall, we were on the street when a car backfired with a sound resembling a gunshot; they quickly covered their necks and ran for cover. It was on such occasions that I realized how vivid their memories were.

I believe that my parents were consciously trying to protect me from too much knowledge of their grim war experience. They wanted to look forward. And they wanted me to take

full advantage of the opportunities of life as an American. They didn't want me to be burdened by memories of Europe or by our status as immigrant refugees.

When I grew older, and saw the bright future before me for professional development and for raising a family here in the United States, I felt very blessed. My parents tried to tell me that they understood my optimism. They too had once been, at my age in pre-war Poland, successful in business with a happy and growing family. Frankly, I found that hard to believe.

I had pictured their early life through the filter of what I understood of the degrading experience of the Nazi era. I could not imagine their lives when they were young, happy and prosperous. Only some years later, after their deaths, after several visits to Czestochowa, and after making a real effort to understand my parents' war-time experience, did I also begin to understand their life before the war. I understood that there was a time when the future looked as bright and as safe as mine does today. I began to appreciate how quickly life can slip from normal to calamitous. And, only then did I really appreciate the dynamics of the onset of the Holocaust. I wondered how I would behave if confronted with the challenges they faced in their lives, In particular, I wondered if I would have the courage and fortitude to live the double life my father led as a leader in the Jewish Resistance in the Czestochowa ghetto.

Would you describe your pre-war family?

Our family name in Poland was Zylbersztajn. My father, Leon, was born in Piotrkow Trybunalski in 1905 to Shmuel and Sarah. My mother, Roza was born in Czestochowa and was two years younger than my father. Her maiden name was Rozenblat.

My father's parents were wholesale merchants in Piotrkow. They were quite religious, and as a boy, my father was expected to be orthodox and also to join the family business. But his older sisters were secularly educated, and he decided to follow their example. Also, he was very mechanically gifted and sought to learn a trade- several in fact- rather than become a merchant. My father was also a confirmed Zionist and decided to emigrate to Palestine, as the land of Israel was then called. In order to be allowed to enter Palestine by the British colonizers, he had to prove his skill as an agricultural worker. This, he addressed by attending a farm school run by Zionist organizations in Poland at the time. He passed his examinations and "made aliyah." That is, he emigrated to Palestine and joined a kibbutz in Petah Tikva.

However, their kibbutz could not afford to buy land. Instead the members performed agricultural work for private farmers (Arab and Jewish) and pooled their earnings according to the communal principles of the kibbutz movement.

One day Leon received a sad letter saying that his mother was gravely ill and could die soon. And, so he returned home to Piotrkow. While at home, he was drafted into the Polish army for two or three years; and, and as luck would have it, he was stationed in Czestochowa. He recalled his time in the army as reminding him why he had emigrated. He was subjected to anti-Semitic taunts from his superiors and colleagues in the army. However, he also learned many military skills and disciplines which served him well during his activities fighting with the resistance during WWII.

So, one day, in 1928, while stationed in the Army camp in Czestochowa, he got sick and went to the Jewish hospital for treatment. There, he met my mother, Roza, who was a volunteer worker there. They fell in love and soon got married.

My mother came from a secular Jewish family. Her father, Abraham Rozenblat, had established the first elementary school for Jewish youth where the teaching was done in the

Polish language. My mother was an aspiring businesswoman. She worked as an accountant at a metal works factory known as Altman's. My father, an impatient soul, wanted to return to Palestine with her. But, she had other ideas. When he described the hard rural life she could look forward to in Palestine, she suggested they try life in Poland first. My mother prevailed; and, they started their own business designing and manufacturing bicycle parts and accessories. My father used his technical skills and his fascination with bicycles. My mother brought in her entrepreneurial knowledge and business management skills. It also helped that she already had a good reputation with the suppliers of raw materials. They introduced and produced bicycle parts under the brand name "elZet" which was based my father's initials, in a factory they built at 26 Krotka Street. They worked very hard and built a very successful business. My dad was particularly proud of his adherence to the principle of treating others as he would want to be treated. He was proud of the working conditions in his factory. He had some 70 people, both Jews and Catholics working there. And, his new factory building had showers for the employees at a time when this sort of amenity was rare.

They had two sons, Niutek (born in 1931) and Zygmus (born in 1936). Since they worked long hours at the company, they were grateful that my mom's unmarried sister Tonia lived

with them to help raise the children. Their success allowed them to move from their apartment at 37 Warszawska Street to a modern new apartment at 19 Garibaldi Street in early 1939.

And so, they never made it to Palestine. And, they made no effort to leave as the winds of war began to overtake Europe. One could ask why? Didn't they see what was coming? Or, maybe having lived through WWI as children, they could not imagine how much worse this war would be for everyone, especially for the Jews.

You learned from your parents about the events that your family went through in Czestochowa during WWII. Who else told you about it?

Of course, I did learn a great deal from my parents when I was older, especially from my father. (My mom died when I was only 25; my dad lived till I was 49.) But I learned much of what I know from my two closest cousins, Sigmund Rolat, my mother's nephew, and Jacob Shacharon, my father's nephew. Both lived through the German occupation close to my parents, and were kept alive by my father's intervention. It is tragic that while he was able to save my two cousins, my dad was unable to save his own two sons.

The Germans arrived in Czestochowa in the very first days of the war. They terrorized the population, especially the Jews. My parents were forced to sell their business for small amount to a 'Volksdeutscher,' an ethnic German. But, they hid some of their valuables on the grounds of their former factory and were able to use these during the later years of the war to buy food and other necessities. From the very first years of the occupation, Jews were able to survive only by laboring in jobs the Germans deemed essential to their war effort.

Fortunately, my father was able to impress one important German who came to Czestochowa from Breslau, Oberleutnant Karl Werner of the Schutzpolizei. Werner was responsible for maintaining the civilian infrastructure in good order for the German occupiers. My father convinced Werner that he would work for him as a "universal engineer," managing a group of skilled craftsmen who would repair equipment and furniture, renovate apartments to be occupied by German officers and their families, and do whatever projects came up from day to day. This position gave my father the freedom to move about within Czestochowa, both inside and outside the Ghetto. He was allowed to use a bicycle, which was generally prohibited to Jews. What the Germans didn't know was that he recruited his group of mechanics, plumbers, carpenters, and other craftsmen, from

among trusted colleagues he knew from pre-war Zionist organizations; and, that my father's workgroup functioned as an arm of the Jewish resistance movement, The Jewish Resistance coordinated its actions in Czestochowa with the other resistance organizations – Polish Home Army and the Communist People's Army.

As an example of how this worked, my dad told me that from time to time, he would get a message that an electrical repair was needed at the City Hall telephone switchboard. And while he inspected the damage, the switchboard operator, who was a spy, would whisper a warning about what she had overheard on the telephone, about a planned Nazi action. He then carried the warning back to the resistance in the Ghetto. Another time, he received instructions to meet a parachutist who had been dropped into the nearby forest by the Soviets and smuggle him into the Ghetto. The Jewish partisans also punished traitors; and they stole weapons from careless German soldiers.

Once, members of the Jewish underground suspected that a certain Jew was working for the Nazis. His role was to stand in the railroad station and spot Jews who wanted to escape from Czestochowa so the Germans could arrest them. One day, my father was sent to the train station to find out if this man really collaborated with the Germans. When he finally saw him, he called him by his name and asked pretending that he is concerned about the man's safety: "Why aren't you wearing your hat?" since it was illegal for the Jews to be seen bareheaded. The man answered "No, no, no, I am working for the Germans," assuming that my father was playing a similar role. Now my father was sure. The underground decided to execute the traitor, and in the evening the same day the man was captured and poisoned. This man had been responsible for death of many Jews.

Another time the partisans needed a German uniform with a certain rank. My father was responsible for the success of this action. My cousin Jerzyk Rosenblat, the older brother of my cousin Sigmund, volunteered to carry out this mission together with a group of young Jews. The group left the Ghetto and went to the park at foothill of the Jasna Gora Monastery. There, one of the young women in the group seduced a German soldier; and the men killed him and removed his uniform. Later, twelve Poles were executed in retaliation. It did not occur to the Germans that the Jews would be capable of such action so far from the Ghetto. I know my father felt badly about this retaliatory action till the day he died.

During the opening ceremony of "The Czestochowa Jews" exhibition at the Polish Consulate in New York in 2004, an elderly woman by the name of Rachla Flug (maiden

name Brownes) approached me and asked: "Mr. Silberstein, are you somehow related to Leon Zylbersztajn?" Surprised I answered: "Did you know my father?" "Oh, yes" she answered, "I served under his leadership." I learned that at age thirteen and looking like a Christian child, Rachla carried messages between Ghetto and the train station, between the Polish and Jewish underground. She wore high boots and in one boot she had hidden a gun.

Over the years I have met many people in Israel and America who told me that my father had saved their lives. Still I found it very hard to reconcile my image of my mild mannered refugee immigrant father with the courageous leader of partisans who lived a double life every day for five years during the war.

After the war, my dad realized that he had been protected by Werner. He didn't know if this was because Werner suspected and was possibly sympathetic to his underground activities; or simply because his work was so valuable to Werner. Werner certainly suspected something.

My dad told me that one time, when there was a delay in receiving the renewal of his permit to work, which was, basically, a permit to remain alive, Werner told him that this was because the Germans were disappointed with his work. My father protested that he did the best he could "with his hands." But when pressed that the Germans wanted intelligence information about the Jewish community, he said, "you can have what you want from my labour, but I will not betray my people. I know that in your own country, you have no respect for traitors." He said this, expecting to be killed for his impertinence. However, his permit was renewed.

I am not certain what my mother knew, or didn't know, about my father's underground activities. While he was working for Werner, her job, like that of many Jewish women, was to launder and polish household goods stolen from Jews so they could be sent back to Germany to be used by the civilian population. It was degrading work.

My parents did what they could using bribe money to protect family, including their own children. My older brother Niutek was autistic and so could not be smuggled to live with a Polish family. Every time the Germans rounded up the Jews to review their status, my parents would drag Niutek and hide him in a closet or wardrobe until their return, with the fear that one day, they wouldn't return. (I get claustrophobic every time I think about what it would be like for him to wake up, alone!) One time, the Germans learned about Niutek

and took him away to his death. By the time my father returned, he already knew what had happened. "It's good that I did not see the death of my own child," he said with a broken heart.

My dad provided what he believed was better protection for my younger brother, Zygmus. He smuggled him to a trusted Polish Catholic doctor, Dr. Ziemiaszewski, who served in the resistance and who lived just outside the Ghetto. Because my dad could leave the Ghetto, he would arrange to visit Zygmus' guardian family every few weeks, see how Zygmus was faring, and make a payment. Near the end of the war, conditions were getting very bad, and my father knew that he would be confined to the HASAG labor camp and no longer be able to leave the Ghetto. He made a very large final payment to Ziemiaszewski.

In early 1945, when Czestochowa was finally liberated, and both my mother and dad were still alive, the first thing my father did was go to retrieve my little brother. He went to Ziemiaszewski's house but the family was gone. He learned that they had left for a country home. My dad followed him there and found that they had left there as well. He was told a young boy with the doctor's family, probably Zygmus, had drowned in the lake. When my father tried to find the doctor, the doctor's resistance colleagues threatened him with death if he persisted in the search. While my parents had every reason to believe that Zygmus was dead, they never gave up hope.

Two years later, my parents were living in Munich, Germany, waiting to emigrate to the United States. I was born when my mother was forty years old and physically weak from her wartime exposure. I was their "miracle baby" meant to replace what they lost.

Did your father try to launch his factory back after the war?

I know he thought about it. It was not a safe time for Jews or businessmen in Poland. The country had gone from Nazi domination to rule by the communists.

When did you come to Poland the first time?

I came to Poland the first time in 1967. I came with my cousin Sigmund Rolat and his son

Jeffrey. I was twenty years old then. But first we went to the Soviet Union to see life behind “the iron curtain”. This trip had a great impact on us and we viewed Poland and Warsaw in a different light. What really surprised me was that Czestochowa was a quite big city, bigger than I imagined. I was able to see where my parents had lived and where they were confined during the war.

Why did you decide to participate in organizing the Jews of Czestochowa Exhibition?

Frankly speaking, I was quite impressed by your father Jerzy Mizgalski’s proposal to organize the exhibition of the Jews of Czestochowa. I was impressed by the research he had done about the Jewish community of Czestochowa. He wanted to reproduce life in the way it was before the war, and I was fascinated that he wanted to portray the contribution which Jews made to the development of Czestochowa in the centuries before the Holocaust. I was keen to learn about this and to understand more about Christian-Jewish relationships in pre-war Poland. Because of the Jews of Czestochowa Exhibition I was able to understand that Czestochowa society was vibrant, modern and tolerant. Perhaps that is probably why my parents could not anticipate the rapid descent to hell brought on by the Nazi invasion. The exhibition helped me understand how rapidly society can slip from normal civilized life to degradation. It served as a warning to preserve what we have and fight prejudice and genocide.

I was touched that your father, a Catholic, was so interested in telling this story. I was heartened by all the people, Christians and Jews with roots in Czestochowa, who wanted to see the exhibition in Poland, or who asked that we bring it to North America. I was also touched that the Mayor of Czestochowa was so interested in welcoming the Jews who came from all over the world for the opening the exhibition. I was also glad that we involved the few surviving Jews in Czestochowa, the members of the local branch of the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland, and honored them in all our events.

A few years ago, in London, I was invited by Antony Polonsky, the great professor of Polish Jewish history, to attend a meeting of the “45 Aid Society,” a group of Jewish orphans from Poland who came to England after the war. They are still known as “the boys, even though most are close to 80 years in age. Led by Ben Helfgott, they still meet monthly in London. Polonsky lectured about current developments in Catholic-Jewish dialogue in Poland. Some of the boys said that there should be no outreach to current day

Poles because of the sense of betrayal they still felt. However, the majority applauded that there are people in Poland who are eager to build “bridges” with the Jewish community; to do something constructive. They argued that one cannot blame younger generations for the injuries caused by their ancestors.

We shouldn't be driven by stereotypes and prejudice. We ought to learn about those most painful events in our history and understand why it happened.

None of us can tell how he or she would have acted in such extreme situations created by Nazi occupation and therefore he or she should not judge.

Interviewed by Magdalena Mizgalska, September, 2010

Alan Silberstein's Genealogy



