

Seweryn Szperling<sup>1</sup>

## **The Son of Four Parents<sup>2</sup>**

**You are one of the few Częstochowa Jewish children “rescued” from the Holocaust. What do you remember and what did you learn later about your “rescue”?**

I learned about my rescue after the War. I was born in March 1940 in a house at 6 Nowy Rynek (New Market Square). The Częstochowa ghetto was established one year later. When I was two and a half years old, my parents sent me from the ghetto to Anna and Stanisław Pociępny, whom they knew through friends from before the War. My new carers received remuneration in the form of gold and money. As a child, I well remember the golden ribbons which decorated the home of my foster parents. There was no trace of them a few years after liberation. The Pociępny couple had no children. They lived at the beginning of Kiedrzyńska Street, where the Clothing Co-operative building was erected. Near the annexe, in which there was a rabbit hutch, Stanisław dug a hole, through which a thick pipe provided air. I spent my childhood there. In the summer, I sat in a wooden barrel, dug into the ground amongst raspberry bushes. I awaited liberation there. Hiding and giving shelter to a Jewish child in the vicinity of the former Częstochowa ghetto required extraordinary courage and sacrifice.

I remember nothing about the time of the ghetto so, for a long time, I thought that Anna and Stanisław Pociępny were my biological parents. In Canada, they wrote about me as a “son with four parents”...

**What do you know, and when did you learn, about the fate of your biological Jewish family?**

I saw a photograph of my father for the first time at my aunt’s home in Israel. I brought that photograph to Poland and it’s my most valuable memoir of my family. Despite intensive searching, I’ve not been able to find a photograph of my biological mother. Nachuma (Halina in Polish). More than 90% of my Jewish family lost their lives during the *Shoah*. My parents, Nechuma and Michał Szperling, were murdered in the summer of 1943 during a mass execution at the Częstochowa Jewish Cemetery. The fact that I still have other members of my family living in Israel, I found out about after the War. This was attested to by the parcels received by my foster parents. They sent us money and parcels of oranges. As a child, I loved the fruit and my foster parents always responded

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with thanks. They informed my Israeli family about my health and about life in those post-War conditions, as well as asking for more frequent parcels and for financial support.

**You grew up in a Polish family. Your childhood and youth were spent amongst Polish friends. What particular events have remained in your memory?**

Like my other Polish peers, I attended elementary school (No.2 Elementary School, in Częstochowa on Dąbrowska/Jasnogórska Street) and middle school (the Sienkiewicz Comprehensive Secondary School in Częstochowa). We played together in the yard, playing football and volleyball. Friendships developed amongst us. As within every peer group, there were disputes and squabbles. Sometimes, I heard something aimed at me but, generally, I didn't sense any anti-Semitism. Some of those childhood friendships have survived the test of time. I'm closest to two friends who shared the same courtyard. We've known each other since 1946. To this day, I keep in contact with Zenek and Marek. At each of our meetings, we remember our past childhood and our bachelor days. In 2009, I located two friends from my old street – Krzysztof and Zenon. I'm also in contact with other friends from school and from work.

My favourite games were hide-and-seek, cops-and-robbers and bicycle races. I also trained as a boxer. I liked to watch war, cowboy, adventure and travel films. I loved to read various books, except for schoolbooks. In my youth, stamp collecting was my passion. I had large collections of stamps which I have to this day. I was also interested in tourism, geography, painting watercolours, drawing and paper art.

**As a child growing up in a poor Polish family with deep-rooted traditions according to the principles of the Catholic religion, did you participate in Catholic religious life?**

The Pociepny family were Catholic and brought me up in that tradition. I attended religion classes in school. In 1950, when I was ten years old, I was baptised. Two weeks later, I took my first Communion. I served as an altar boy and, every Sunday, I served at Mass at St.Zygmunt's church in Częstochowa. Sometimes, early in the morning before school, I took part in Holy Masses at St.Jakub's church in Częstochowa. I served as an altar boy at all the church celebrations.

**When did you connect with the Jewish community and with members of your Jewish family?**

My cousin Renia, who is nineteen years older than me, was born in Piotrków Trybunalski, where she survived the occupation and lived straight after the War. She survived the Nazi occupation. She found out that I was alive and that I'd been saved by a Catholic family. A few months after the liberation of Częstochowa, she visited me with the idea of collecting me from the Pociepny family. She was unsuccessful. In 1946, Renia left Poland. The first stage of her journey to Palestine was Cyprus. From there, she illegally

reached Palestine. She took part in the war of liberation for the creation of the State of Israel. It was actually Renia who told other members of my family, living in Palestine, that I was in Częstochowa, being raised by a Polish family. Afraid that I'd be stolen away by Jews, my foster parents accompanied me to and from school.

During my school years and also later, parcels from Israel arrived at my home. They were sent by my father's sister, Aunt Sabina, and my cousins, Nolek and Renia. Sometimes, there were ten-dollar banknotes in the parcels. Apart from the modest help from my family in Israel, my carers received considerable help from various international Jewish organisations in the USA and Canada. That help was comprised of clothing and money. The Israeli embassy in Warsaw also sent money which Mum went to collect personally. Every month, the Częstochowa Jewish Community Council helped my family financially. It also paid for me to take a car mechanics course. Unfortunately for my foster parents, that help was insufficient. The main problem was the fact that my foster father, a stove-fitter by trade, was a chronic alcoholic and a troublemaker. Despite the fact that my foster mother traded the clothing and the oranges, neither the trade nor the money from PKO (Polish bank) was sufficient to raise our standard of living. We lived in poverty because my father's alcohol consumed everything.

It was while I was attending middle school that I got to think that something was not quite right. I began to ask more and more questions of my carers. Among other things, why we were living in and looking after the Szperling building at 20 Garibaldi Street? Also, my birth certificate raised doubt about my identity. On it, I was called "Zew Szperling" which, on my school identity card, had become "Seweryn Pociepny". Further doubt was raised by the court case for my adoption which was lost by Aunt Sabina. Also, the Pociepny family did not receive the court documents regarding my adoption. At the age of eighteen, I received my identity card. Looking at that Polish identity document, I found a new surprise – "Seweryn Pociepny, son of Nechuma and Michał". But my carers were called Anna and Stanisław Pociepny. I posed this question to my foster parents, "I call you Mum and Dad, why are your names different?"

The Częstochowa Jewish Community Council knew my true origins, as did a few Jewish families. I was invited to their homes for Jewish holidays. That took place especially during the years 1958-1964, and also after my return from Israel in the years 1965-1970. From time to time, I took part in the prayer services at the prayerhouse, located at the time in the former *mikveh* on Garibaldi Street. So, more or less, that's what my connection with the Częstochowa Jewish community looked like.

So, as an adult with an identity card, I began to fully understand the tragedy of my biological parents. I understood that my life depended on the actions of the Pociepny family. In 1960, Aunt Sabina sent me an invitation to come to Israel. The Polish government, of the time, refused to issue me with a passport. In accordance with legislation at the time, I was liable to be conscripted. For four years, I was refused

permission to leave. In 1964, I was honourably discharged from doing military service. I obtained a passport and permission to travel to Israel. By June 1964, I was already with my Jewish family.

**You returned to Poland. What motivated that decision – sentiment, emotion, friends from your youth, a first love or was it simply anxiety over the need to adapt to a new environment?**

The desire to meet and be among my real family – that was the reason for my trip. In the summer of 1964, being twenty four years old, I got off the ship in Haifa. The family was already waiting for me. Amongst the group who greeted me was one of my more distant cousins. I met her by chance during a visit to a Jewish family in Częstochowa, whom she had come to visit in 1962. It was actually she who, two years later, pointed out to me my Aunt and the remaining members of my family at the port in Haifa. It's difficult to categorise that meeting – there were tears and there was joy.

I lived with Aunt Sabina during my whole stay in Israel. Zev, her son, my cousin, arranged a job for me in a factory. I was happy. I was meeting new people and time passed quickly. After six months, I received various army questionnaires to fill in. At that time, military law stated that anyone living in Israel for more than six months was to be called up for military service. Various thoughts came into my head. What do I do now? I could stay here in the army, but how do I assimilate into the local culture and environment? In Poland, I'd left my foster parents, who had saved my life, and I was their only child. I missed Częstochową. I decided to return. A few months later, I informed my aunt and the rest of my family of my decision. It was hard for them to understand. They said, "You have your closest family here. This is your homeland". We had long and stormy discussions. In the end, it happened. In the second half of 1965, I sailed on a liner from Haifa to Naples. Next, by train, I reached Vienna and then Częstochowa.

**You again took the decision to leave Poland and chose a different destination. Did you receive any kindness and help from Jewish organisations?**

I returned to Częstochowa full of new experiences. I was more self-confident. It's known that travel broadens the mind. For my foster parents, I brought back rosaries and medallions from Nazareth and Bethlehem, as well as other small souvenirs from Jerusalem.

I settled in quickly but, again, various thoughts bothered me. New doubts and emotions arose regarding the Pociepny family. A few days after my arrival, by chance, I found envelopes at home which contained copies of applications to government institutions. They originated from the time when I was trying to leave to visit my family in Israel. After this discovery, I was unable to sleep at night. I asked myself, "How could they have written applications asking that I not be given permission to travel to Israel?" To this day, I've kept copies of both applications.

I was overcome with anger. I was disappointed by their conduct towards me. After all, I trusted them completely and, as I'd promised, I'd returned to them from Israel. From that discovery, to this day, I am tormented by the thought, "Was I their only son, as they stressed, or was I merely a source of income for them?"

I didn't speak about my doubts. I acted as though nothing had happened. I went to work and shared my salary with them. Help also came from overseas. Unfortunately, at home, not much had changed. My father's drunkenness still shattered the peace within the family. I spoke with him about this many times. I convinced him that he needed to settle down, but without result. My endeavours were met with the opposite reaction. I had become "Enemy No.1" to both my foster parents.

I put up with that atmosphere for three years. In 1968, I left home. Before my trip to Israel, I had worked in the *Misatoprojekt* Construction Design Company. After my return, I worked for *Wetnopol* (the former *1st May* Woollen Mill). I supported myself. More and more, I became convinced that I would distance myself from my foster parents.

The prevailing atmosphere within the family and the anti-Semitic witch-hunt that followed the events of March 1968, raised questions within me, "What should I do now? Which path should I choose for my life?"

In the spring of 1969, I decided to leave Poland. I lodged the relevant documents for that aim. My departure was sponsored by HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). The Communist authorities placed a condition on it – that I renounce my Polish citizenship. In a situation such as that, permission to leave the country was tantamount to removing any possibility of returning to it. I handed in my identity card, my military service papers, my driver's licence and I received the relevant travel document – for a one-way journey.

I repeatedly put off the date of my departure. It was only in June 1970 that I left Poland. I left as "Seweryn Prybulski". This was my biological mother, Nechuma's, maiden name from Kielce. My aim was to go to Australia. In the refugee camp in Vienna, I changed my mind. I decided to leave for the United States. The next stage of my journey was a camp for Jewish migrants in Rome. By November 1970, I was already in the United States. This year marks 40 years since my emigration from Poland!

I consistently maintained contact with my foster parents in Częstochowa. I also sent them parcels and money. My wife, Alfreda, also visited them during a stay in Poland. She was my Częstochowa fiancée who, in 1972, I brought to the United States. Every visit of my wife and daughters to my home city also included a visit to my foster parents and the provision of financial support. I also know that the Pociepny family was helped by Jewish charitable institutions. No wealth, no awards can equal the gratitude for saving a life from the Nazi hell. My carers, my saviours, risked death for two and a half years. That was how long I was hidden with them until liberation.

Eighteen years after leaving in 1970, I came to Częstochowa for the first time as “Severin Szperling”. My foster parents were no longer alive. I laid flowers and expressed my gratitude at their graves in Kula Catholic Cemetery. I look after their graves to this day.

Whenever I return to Częstochowa, I first visit the graves of my parents – my biological parents at the Jewish cemetery and those who raised me in the Catholic cemetery. Only then do I visit friends and acquaintances.

**You have a unique and probably the largest collection of medals connected to the Holocaust. How long have you been working on completing your collection and how do you intend to display it to the wider public?**

I’ve been working on completing my collection for 37 years and I’m still adding to it. My collection from the Holocaust is comprised of 340 medals in bronze, silver and gold. At home, 80 kilometres from Mexico, I have a separate, custom-made cabinet, with lit shelves for the medals. My collection is the largest in the world in connection with the *Shoah*. Other record-breaking collections are those connected with, for example, Janusz Korczak, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, as well as relating to the transportation of Jews to and liberation from the concentration camps. Even the larger museums don’t have the like, not even Jewish institutions in New York or Israel. In the coming months, a catalogue of my medals will be published in English entitled “A Catalogue of Holocaust Medals – a History Etched in Metal.” In this way, I want to keep alive the memory of my biological parents. My wife and I continue to travel the world looking for medals commemorating the *Shoah*. After the publishing of my catalogue, I will gladly display a part of my collection in Poland, for example, at the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

**What do you think of the changes in contemporary Częstochowa? How do you rate the attitude of first, second and further post-WWII Częstochowa generations towards Jews, especially towards Jews from this city?**

To summarise my thoughts, I have good memories of my home city and I’m glad that positive changes have taken place here. *Częstochowianie*, who were born after World War II, are a different generation. They understand what anti-Semitism is and are interested in the history of the Jews. The Day of Remembrance, organised by the World Society of Częstochowa Jews and Their Descendants, is a commemoration without precedent. It reminds Częstochowa people that Jews lived here for centuries and died here.

