

## Lea Sigiel-Wolinetz<sup>1</sup> - an Interview

### What type of education did your parents receive?

My mother was an only child. She was brought up in a rented apartment near the Bank of Poland at 22 Aleja NMP. Before the War, it was a very good, not to say luxury, district. For example, doctors, lawyers and businessmen lived there. My mother's father, Aron Horowicz, was an importer and exporter of coffee, tea and sugar in Częstochowa. He had a shop in the *Stary Rynek* (Old Market Square). His brothers were entrepreneurs. Izrael Horowicz was editor of one of the pre-War Częstochowa newspapers. My grandmother, Lea Siemacka (?) looked after the home and loved to go to the theatre and to the opera. Her favourite plays were "Hamlet" and "King Lear". The moment the opera would come to Częstochowa, my grandmother would drop everything and go straight to a performance. My great-grandmother couldn't understand this. She was a simple woman. She considered that every mother should look after her children and not go to performances. Upon hearing those words, Grandmother Lea would diplomatically reply to her mother, "Don't worry, Pola is a sensible girl."

Her parents wanted Pola to become a lawyer. They sent my mother to the prestigious High School of Dr Filip Axer in Częstochowa. It was a school where lessons were given in the Polish language. My mother didn't know enough Hebrew or Yiddish to study in those languages. My mother had already graduated from high school by the outbreak of the War. The time spent at Dr Filip Axer's high school turned out to be very important to my mother. A few days before she died, when her illness was at a very advanced stage, in conversations with us she would return to memories of Dr Axer and his wife, Klara.

My father, David Zygiel, was born in Praga near Warsaw. He was orphaned at the age of seven. His mother, Shana Morgenstern, died of tuberculosis. His father, Naftuli Zygiel, married again. Naftuli Zygiel's second wife didn't like her new step-son. When my father, David Zygiel, was ten years old, she threw him out of the home. He moved from nearby Praga to his aunt's apartment in Warsaw where fifteen members of that family were crowded into two rooms. Such living conditions meant the end of my father's education. He had earlier gone to a Yiddish-language school. However, to put it delicately, he was not a model student. I suppose that, due to his mother's illness, he felt a bit lost within the difficult conditions of his earlier childhood. However, he must have been a lively boy, full of ideas.

He told me of one of his pranks. "The rabbi, who taught my father at school, would fall asleep at his desk. One day, my father, quietly, smeared glue on the desktop. Suddenly, while he slept, the rabbi's head nodded forward and his long beard became stuck to the desk." You can imagine that, when he awoke, the rabbi was not at all pleased. What was

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his further education after he was thrown out of his family home? He walked around the streets of Warsaw asking people to take him in and to teach him a trade. In the end, he found someone who taught him to sew suits. Through long and hard work, my father established his own shop in Warsaw, on Żelazna Street. Later, World War II broke out. In summary, my mother received a far better and more thorough education than did my father.

### **When, and under what circumstances, did your parents meet?**

My parents met in Częstochowa. Dad was liberated in April 1945 from the Nazi Buchenwald camp and Mum, in January, from the Hasag Pelcery Labour Camp in Częstochowa. Even before liberation, Dad made a pact with his friend that “Whoever survived that hell, would seek out the family of the other.”

After World War II, Dad looked for his sister, Róża (she had remained at home in Praga, together with my grandfather Naftuli Zygiel and his second wife). He also looked for the family of his friend. He ended up in Częstochowa. because somebody told him that five, beautiful, Jewish girls were living in one of the apartments. He decided to check if one of the people he was looking for might not be amongst them. He knocked on the door. It was my mother who opened it. That is how they met. They were married on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945 and lived in Częstochowa until the pogrom in Kielce.

In 1946, they thought about how they would leave Poland and to where. They had no family in the other parts of Europe. They travelled from border to border through Italy, Czechoslovakia and Austria, until they reached Germany. They travelled under various conditions – on board a ship, in a railway wagon together with sheep. You have to know that their fate after the *Shoah* constitutes a major chapter in the history of our family. My mother was pregnant and due to give birth at the end of 1945 or at the beginning of 1946. However, on account of all the horrible events which she had encountered, she miscarried. I would have had a brother. At the end of 1946, they reached Germany. They stayed there until February 1949 in the town of Bad Wörishofen.

### **What were your parents’ occupations during those three years in Germany?**

To be honest, I don’t know. At that time, my father was 32 years old. I don’t think that he had steady work. He undertook various jobs in order to support the family. My mother couldn’t work because, on 17th August 1948, she gave birth to me. She put a lot of effort into my care and upbringing. My parents were simply trying to sort out a new life for themselves. After the tragic experiences of the *Shoah*, it became a challenge for them to build a new family to replace the one which they had lost. They didn’t demand much from life. They just wanted to be happy together.

### **How did your parents come to the United States?**

My mother had a cousin, Tonia Siematicska, who, towards the end of the 1930's, left to study medicine in Italy. Already before the War, from letters sent by Tonia, it turned out that she had met someone, married him and that she had two children - Mario and Izabela. My mother declared, "What odd names Tonia gave her Jewish children". Contact with them was broken after the outbreak of war. Thanks to their "odd-Italian names (Mario and Izabela)", among other things, it was possible to find Tonia.

While pregnant with me in 1947, my mother wrote the following letter in English:

*"To any Jewish organisation: Help me! I am looking for my cousin Tonia. I don't know where she lives. I don't know her surname. I know that she is a doctor, that her husband is also a doctor and that she has two children – Mario and Izabela."*

Learning English at Dr Filip Axer's high school had now come in useful. Two months later, a message in response came from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Tonia had been found in New York. She wrote a letter to my mother asking, "Who has survived from the family?" The reply was as follows, "No one, except for me. But I have a husband and I am pregnant..." Aunt Tonia, together with her husband, had come to the United States already before the outbreak of World War II. She was a paediatrician, specialising in child cardiology. Her husband was also a cardiologist. Both were in practice. This is how we got to come to America - Aunt Tonia became the sponsor of our trip. After arriving in the United States, my parents began life again from zero. Mum didn't want me to be the last on the school list of students, so she changed my surname from "Zygiel" to "Sigiel".

### **From where did you learn about your family roots?**

My parents told me my family's history. They always responded to my questions regarding the past, even though it revolved around tragic memories. Both spoke Polish. They asked me to teach them English, typical for immigrants. My mother spoke a beautiful Polish and my father spoke Yiddish. He wanted me to answer his questions in Yiddish and that I learn that language. My parents usually spoke to me in Polish and I would reply in English. In that way, there was no "secret language" in our home. Everyone understood Yiddish, English and Polish, even though they could still have problems in expressing their thoughts in a given language. My parents hid nothing from me.

### **What work did your parents do in the United States?**

My mother was a beautiful woman. She found work as a cosmetician. My father always worked in the production of suits.

### **When did you first visit Poland and what are your memories of that visit?**

I came to Poland for the first time six years ago. I wanted to see Częstochowa and it was there that I met Zygmunt Rolat. I came after the opening of the "Jews of Częstochowa" exhibition, but before it was transported to the USA. I was among those people pressuring

to have the exhibition cross the ocean. It was one of the most beautiful things that I have ever encountered. My mother was still alive. She was able to explain and tell me a lot.

**Why did you place so much importance on the “Jews of Częstochowa” exhibition being displayed in the United States?**

I understood that my roots lay in Poland. I was born in Germany and was brought up in the United States. If the War had not have broken out, Częstochowa would have been my home. I consider that the first, second, third and following generations born after the *Shoah* should know their family’s history. They should also know that their ancestors not only died tragically during the *Shoah*, but also led normal lives on Polish soil for many generations.

**How did you manage to convince your mother to leave her sick husband and, for the first time since 1946, come to Poland in 2006 for the Second Reunion of Częstochowa Jews?**

It really wasn’t easy. Mum kept repeating that she wanted to leave her life the way it was. She wanted peace. She was scared that something bad might happen after her return to Częstochowa. She simply didn’t want to hear about returning to Poland. Fortunately, it was Alan, my son and her grandson, who convinced her. One day, he calmly explained that, without grandma Pola, there would be no trip to Poland. He said that, together with her, he wanted to see where she went to high school, where she took walks, where she played, etc. In the end, it worked. It was a remarkable Reunion of Częstochowa Jews and Their Descendants. A highlight was the meal in the *sukkah* shared by different generations of *Częstochowianin*.

**What influenced your decision to publish your mother’s letters?**

That was also not easy. In the beginning, I didn’t want to do it. I thought that they were a bit too personal. My mother valued her privacy greatly. I discussed it with many friends and asked their advice. I began to put off making a decision. In the end, one of my friends said, “Lea, we’re in the same position as you are. We’re also children of Holocaust survivors. However, not all of them want to talk about it. Give us the possibility of understanding what happened to us and to our parents.” After that discussion, I then knew that I was no longer going to waver. I knew what I was going to do.

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

## **To My Mother, Lea<sup>2</sup>**

### ***I Remember***

*On the day we walked along the desecrated streets of our city, under the German “boot”, we knew that we were parting forever. We were separated at the Umschlagplatz in Częstochowa.*

*I held you by the hand, hugging your trembling body. I saw the tears in your eyes and hugged your trembling body even closer – tears ran down your cheeks. Looking at me, you said, “I can’t believe that you’re leaving!”*

*“I have to go. It’s my destiny, mummy.” And it was destiny – directing me towards life, and you to a premature death.*

*I didn’t understand in that way then. Your road was safe, mine was dangerous. (My parents were taken on a railway transport to Treblinka and I ended up in the Hasag Pelcery labour camp).*

*Did I fail you?*

*Did I betray you by my absence?*

*Would I have been able to help you then?*

*There is so much despair, so much grief.*

*You have never been in my home, I have never cooked a meal for you, you never met my husband, you never saw me as I grew up, but the greatest regret is that you never saw your granddaughter and she never saw you. This happiness that you deserved was taken away by brutal murderers. But your granddaughter, Lea, will always carry your name with pride.*

*I will always miss you,*

*Your daughter, Pola.*

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<sup>2</sup> Written by Pola Horowicz (born 12/04/1923, died 11/03/2009), lived in Częstochowa at 32/11 Aleja NMP



Left: Pola (Pesa) Horowicz-Sigiel in her youth

Below: Pola (Pesa) Horowicz-Sigiel, Secound Reunion of Czestochowa  
Jews and Their Descendants, (Czestochowa, October 2006)



It was a beautiful day in the lives of Golda and Mojsis when, as sixteen year olds, they were joined in marriage.

My grandmother was a small, energetic woman, beautiful and clever. My grandfather was a quiet, G-d-fearing man, who established a family and built a factory which was

managed under Golda's iron hand.

My religious great-great-grandfather, Josef, was the family monarch – very much respected and known throughout Białystok for his wisdom. The children grew up, started families and moved away from home, apart from the two youngest - my mother Lea and my beloved aunt Fela. One day, my mother went on a holiday and met a pleasant, intelligent, gentle and handsome man. They became engaged, but then, in 1914, war broke out.

Worried for the lives of those closest to her, my grandmother told them to leave Białystok. She was the one left to manage the factory and look after the home. My great-grandfather, grandfather, mother and aunt Fela (Fajgale) Siematycka all left for Russia. My other grandfather attempted to find them through the Red Cross and through other organisations. After a long period of time, he was informed that those nearest to him had died on the road to Moscow. In despair, he travelled to Białystok in order to find my grandmother. Dazed from fear, she was sitting amid the ruins of her home and factory. He took her to Częstochowa, lovingly took care of her and helped her to return to health. She never forgot about that and always loved him (they were my great-grandmother Golda Siematycka and my grandfather Aaron Horowicz).

The pain of losing his whole family was enormous. My father grieved for my mother (his fiancée). He hung a black veil around her portrait, would look at it and remember his beloved Lea.

The World War I years were good for him in financial terms and he became wealthy. He imported good quality coffee and tea. He owned real estate. Again, he was lucky.

It was 1918 and the War had ended. Out of the blue, someone knocked on the door. The housekeeper opened the door and fainted. She recognised that the woman standing at the door was the woman whose portrait was surrounded by the black veil. It was my mother. Everyone had returned (the Red Cross had made a mistake). Happiness had come anew.

In 1919, the wedding ceremony was conducted in the New Synagogue (now the home of the Częstochowa Philharmonic).

When I was a girl growing up, they would tell me about that wedding in great detail. My parents had a wonderful life but, of course, the best day was the day I was born. I was named after my other grandmother (my father's mother). Her name was Pesa Dukat. Aunt Fela got married and moved out. I missed her a lot. After a few years, she gave birth to my beautiful, young cousin Josele, whom I loved very much. Every year, I would travel to their holiday home where I had a great time. It was probably in Sosnowiec.

I attended the private school of Dr Philip Axer. I wore a uniform which was a status symbol (like wearing Gucci clothes) – the “Polish intelligentsia”. What could destroy such a successful life – security, education, love and all that luxury? My life was a fortress and I loved it. But, after the holidays in September 1939, everything changed.

Written by Pola Horowicz  
Resident of Częstochowa, Poland  
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Born 12th April 1923, died 11th March 2009

Submitted by: Lea Sigiel-Wolinetz  
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### Family Tree of Lea Zygiel (Sigiel)- Wolinetz



