

A man who started from nothing and came about on an international scale

About the wartime fate of the founder of the Nissenbaum Family Foundation, Zygmunt Nissenbaum – whose family lived in the Warsaw ghetto – and its beginnings in Poland, we are talking with Anna Dusik, a co-worker of the Foundation from its very beginning and a Member of the Board. On 6 June, the Warsaw Ghetto Museum signed an agreement on mutual cooperation

The President of the Nissenbaum Family Foundation, Gideon Nissenbaum, lives with his family in Germany. How often does he manage to come to Poland?

When the Foundation was looked after by the boss, its founder Zygmunt (Sigmund Shimon) Nissenbaum, he would come here very often because he treated it like his beloved child. After it was founded, he assigned professional duties related to business affairs in Germany to his sons, and the Foundation became not only his hobby, but downright the goal of his life. He spent more time here with his wife Sonja than in Konstanz. This is the home town of Gideon, who comes here when he has to do something urgent – for 4-5 days once every two months. His presence is often not so necessary in the age of the Internet.

Poland was the homeland of Zygmunt Nissenbaum...

The boss was born in Warsaw, in a wealthy family. His father owned several brickyards and construction companies in the Praga district – where the family lived – as well as in Marki, Pustelnik, and Radzymin. When the war broke out, the boss was 12 years old. For the whole Jewish community, and also for the Polish community, the period of tragic German occupation had begun. Immediately after the Germans entered Poland, acts of intolerance towards his family began on the part of Poles living in Praga. So, they moved to the area where later the

Germans established the ghetto. One could say that the ghetto found them in their own home.

Where was it located?

I don't know where exactly, but around Prosta Street. The boss was the youngest of five siblings – the smartest, and most operative one. He took on the responsibility of supplying the family with food. He would get out of the ghetto and bring food. It sometimes happened that he spent the night in the Jewish cemetery in the Bródno district in the tombs to hide from the Germans. Before the outbreak of the Uprising in the ghetto, he and his brother smuggled weapons into it. He managed to escape from the Umschlagplatz twice – when being led in the group he noticed, for example, that workers were pushing wheelbarrows nearby, so he managed to wander off and grab a hold of one of the wheelbarrows, and push it to some construction site..

He was able to make use of arising situations.

He was always able to find a way out of a situation. He went through camps, including the ones in Budzyń and Płaszów. He would pass off as all sorts of professionals the Germans needed. If they were looking for miners, he was a miner, for locksmiths – a locksmith. The family from his mother's side was murdered in Treblinka. On the other hand, together with his father and brother, he found himself in a transport of manpower needed to build fortifications in Germany. During the train ride, near the German border with Switzerland, near Constance, an Allied raid began. And he managed to escape again. He was hiding in the woods. That's how his "adventure" with Nazi Germany ended. Later he settled in Konstanz, where the whole family lives to this very day.

Did Zygmunt Nissenbaum not think about returning to Poland after the war?

Occupation memories were too tragic, too painful. He would not dare to come here for several decades. He came to Poland in 1983, for the very first time since the war, delegated by a Jewish organization operating in Germany. It was him who became its delegate to celebrate the 40th

anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He got very emotional about this arrival. Poland revived in him. He visited his family areas in Praga. He went to Bródno, to the Jewish cemetery where his ancestors rested. In the years 1948-51, the Polish authorities ordered the liquidation of the cemetery. We have a photo documentation from 1945 – at that time the cemetery was almost intact. In 1983, the boss saw a forest instead of it. That is how it was entered in the land records. The matzevot were pushed aside by bulldozers and collected in three heaps, dumps. I met the boss just then, in 1983, during his first visit to Poland. He knew that I was a construction engineer. Later, I made all of the Foundation's construction projects, I was a permanent associate and from the very beginning a Member of the Board, then the only one from Poland. The boss was crushed by the degree of the cemetery's devastation. In the Jewish religion, the tombstone must be strictly related to the place of burial of a given person. It was impossible to set them in the places where they had been before. When the cemetery was rebuilt, a competition for its development, under the custody of monument conservators, was announced. The concept won, the authors of which did not want to distort the history and hide the fact that it had been intended for liquidation and who proposed to leave the tombstones in the form of a cluster. When in 1983 the boss decided to rebuild the cemetery, I was convinced that this was not a venture for one man. At that time, steel and concrete were only made available for special rations. It all seemed impossible to me, especially from the funds of one man. The boss did not think about a profit-making foundation yet, he just wanted to rebuild the Bródno cemetery. Before the Foundation went through the official procedure of court registration.

What was the reply of Polish authorities at the time? Did they foster this undertaking?

The answer was: it is a forest area, that is how it was entered in the land records. The Foundation was registered in 1985, it was formally the third foundation established in Poland, and in fact the first one in the post-war period. The road leading to the change of the purpose of the Bródno area, that we are talking, about was very long.

Did Zygmunt Nissenbaum find the tombstones of his family in the cemetery?

The tombs of his ancestors were not found anywhere. Many of the slabs were broken by the bulldozers. The ones in the best condition were gathered around the central embankment – to show how they looked before. An obelisk was supposed to be erected there. That did not happen, because from the very beginning another devastation of the cemetery had begun. The most beautiful, best-preserved gravestones were broken with hammers. We had to apply to the Ministry for permission to purchase steel and then we managed to fence the cemetery.

How was Mr Nissenbaum affected by the next devastation of the cemetery?

We repeatedly reported this matter to the police, but the perpetrators had never been arrested. In 1983, the Praga district was inhabited by the so-called element. I think that this devastation was not the intention of these people, but stealing certain things – the gates were destroyed to have a shorter passage down the street, the copper sheet was ripped off for scrap, the windows and doors were pulled out... We made a project to build a museum of the cemetery. We put up a barrack in which we stored coils of copper sheet and one day we got a phone call that someone was taking away this very heavy sheet. The perpetrator was caught red handed.. He did it in broad daylight to give the impression that this action was intentional and completely legal, that it was supposed to be so. The barrack was devastated. All this discouraged the boss so much that he interrupted the activities until the situation normalised. In 2002, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage was founded, whose aim is to protect the cultural heritage of Jews in Poland, including Jewish cemeteries.

For how long did Mr Nissenbaum stop the activities then?

Actually, there was no return to the case of the cemetery. The intentions had been much greater than what was finally achieved. This is evidenced by, among others the pylons that were to remind about the occupation history of Jews and thanks to which the entrance to the cemetery itself was to be extremely representative. Later the municipality joined in the renovation of the cemetery, but sometimes we still do carry out cleaning works there.

What did Zygmunt Nissenbaum focus on later?

At that time, no Jewish cemetery in Poland was protected. If the cemetery was not devastated somewhere, it was because the local authorities somehow did not care for it. The ones in Krakow and Lodz were in good condition, but the cemeteries in small towns, in the ordinary towns, were threatened with total absorption by the surrounding farmlands. With time, letters began to arrive at the Foundation from people, indicating to us those cemeteries that would have to be taken care of. At that time, the Foundation "recovered" at least one hundred structures sentenced to destruction, to complete liquidation. They were surrounded by more or less the same type of fence – with metal arches and gates – because the boss' intention was for them to serve as long as possible.

You are talking about Zygmunt Nissenbaum with great esteem. What sort of a man was he? What was his character?

He was a special man. He had a great ability to talk to people. Those were times when it was really very difficult to arrange something. At that time, I accompanied him in all the meetings because they concerned one or another construction, and I was associated with it subject wise as a construction engineer. When we entered an office, at the beginning we were refused everything. The boss had the ability to make contacts. During the meeting, the atmosphere slowly relaxed and when we left, we already had promises that the matter would be settled. The boss managed to arrange many things thanks to his personal charm. I remember working with him with great sympathy and admiration. When the war broke out, he was 12 years old. He managed to complete three or four classes of elementary school. And it was the entire period of his official education. Later he didn't have time for his education. Then came the occupation, and after it a time when he had to get every piece of bread when he started from nothing. He was on foreign land without money, without a job, and without a profession. During the occupation, he would pass as specialists in various professions, but practically he did not have any profession at all. And this man not only managed to achieve a good material situation in Germany, but to concentrate the Jewish community around him and represent it in his old homeland, transfer his interests here and with the same commitment conduct activities using private capital. The Foundation started to bring profits only much later, it had not been envisaged for business activity. In the beginning, the boss financed everything out of his personal income. He did not

care for the expenses. He just set goals that proliferated. When more and more cemeteries had to be renovated, he made contact with Polmos and the production of kosher vodka brands began. The city of Bielsko-Biała became the centre of the Foundation's business activity. The income was considerable. The kosher vodka was very much sought after at the time. There were queues of cars waiting in front of Polmos' gate, waiting to be loaded. The boss never took any remuneration for his work at the Foundation. Income from business activity was used for the Foundation's statutory activity.

When did d Gideon Nissenbaum start to manage the Foundation?

After boss died in 2011, Gideon "stepped out" onto the international forum, focusing on the intensification of contacts between Polish, German, and Israeli youth. He became one of the main founders of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Nowadays, to a much smaller extent than before, renovation of Jewish cemeteries is carried out because the attitude of local authorities, which are no longer interested in their liquidation, has changed.

Can you say that Zygmunt Nissenbaum annointed exactly one of his sons, Gideon, as his successor?

I have always been full of admiration for the boss' work and this has not changed to this day. A man who started from nothing was able to exist internationally. The Nissenbaum Family Foundation is known today all around the world. And indeed, the boss prepared Gideon to take his place because already when he came to Poland for the first time after the war, in 1983, he was accompanied by his wife and Gideon, who was then around 20 years old and was introduced by his father to everything.

Gideon Nissenbaum doesn't speak Polish...

It's his mistake – he only knows a few words in Polish, and he doesn't like communicating in English. His wife, Yelena, who is of Belorussian descent, understands Polish. They make a great

couple. She is a sincere woman and full of warmth. I remember that during one of our away integration meetings, I told Gideon that God does not leave anything in a vacuum. He took the boss away from him, but he gave him a wonderful wife.

What is Gideon Nissenbaum's education?

From what I know, he graduated from goldsmith studies, but he does not work in this profession.

What project is the Foundation going to implement in the near future?

We still have financial commitments towards POLIN. Many years ago, we saved from complete destruction the cemetery in Leżajsk, a city which is the goal of pilgrimage of Jews from around the world due to the activities of Tzadik Elimelech. We built a mikvah and a small hotel there in 1988, but now we need to modernise it – this is our next project.

Interview by Anna Kilian