

Pre-war Jewish life in the whole city's dimension

We talk with Rachel (Lili) Kesselman, founder and director of The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko and Yiddele' Memory, about Radomsko rich in Jewish history and travel to a world that is no longer there

The official opening of The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko took place on 2 June 2014, on the birthday of your father, Henry Kesselman, who died in 2001. It was created to commemorate the community of Radom Jews your family belonged to. Radomsko can boast about several important personalities...

In the nineteenth century in Radomsko, Szlomo Kohen Rabinowicz founded a Hasidic group. The last in the tzaddik dynasty was Szlomo Henoach, the founder of the bet midrash in Sosnowiec, who was murdered with his family in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942. One of the most famous residents of Radom was the librarian Tuwia Borzykowski, born in Piotrków Trybunalski, who was also one of the commanders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He found a way to him with the intention of helping to confront the occupants. The famous library in which he worked – „Sholom Aleichem” – had the biggest collection in Yiddish and Hebrew in the entire Poland. It contained around fifteen thousand volumes. For comparison – the library opened solemnly a few years ago by the Mayor of Nice, where I still live for some part of the year, has three thousand volumes. After the war, Borzykowski left for Israel, where he co-founded the Lohamei HaGeta'ot kibbutz (his founding group included, among others, Icchak Cukierman and Cywia Lubetkin from the Jewish Combat Organization). The parents of Herszel Grynszpan, who was born in Hanover, came from Radomsko as well. It was Grynszpan who in 1938 carried out the political assassination of the German diplomat, Ernest vom Rath, in Paris, which the Germans used as a propaganda to organize the pogrom known as the „Crystal Night” in November of the same year.

According to the Virtual Shtetl, 10,000 Jews lived in Radomsko before the war. A maximum of

300 people survived the Holocaust. Your father managed to accomplish that owing to the help of his Christian neighbours...

I describe this moving story on the Museum's official site –

<http://www.kesselman-museum-radomsko.org/>. My father, Herschele, which is Heniek in Polish, who was 18 when the war broke out, came up with the idea of hiding his family of six, including his first wife, in a nearby wood, in a hole dug up in the ground. At night, my dad and his brother Alek went out to bring some potato peels, which Mr. Kaczmarek left especially for them in the garden. From time to time, they would also find shelter in the home of Mr. Wincenty Gniatowski. May they and their descendants be blessed. It was already after the war, on 7 July 1945, when two Poles broke into our family home and murdered my grandmother and twenty-year-old aunt Dworele. After their funeral, and when Alek healed the wounds sustained during this incident, the remaining Kesselmans left Poland, never to return here.

Your dad never came to Poland after the war. And when did you come to Poland for the first time?

It wasn't until 2011. Earlier in New York I met Dr. Steven Smith, Director of the USC Shoah Foundation, and Prof. Eli Wiesel, who convinced me to my first visit to Poland to search for those people who remembered my family. Four days later, I was in Poland.

Did you receive any support from local authorities during the Museum's creation?

When I started the Museum project in 2014, I received support from the then Mayor of the city, Anna Milczanowska, former city Vice Mayor, Wioletta Pal, and from Jarosław Ferenc, who is the current Mayor of Radomsko. I am very happy to have such partners. I thank all of the people of good will in Radomsko.

What is the uniqueness of The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko?

This is the only museum in Europe – and probably in the world, according to the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich – which depicts Jewish life in Poland before World War II not in a closed museum space, but in the dimension of the entire city. Cities that had not been a metropolis like Warsaw or Lodz, but also not a small shtetl with three streets, where an hour would be enough to visit them. Radomsko was the second ghetto that the Germans created in the occupied Polish territory. The first one was established in Piotrków Trybunalski already in October 1939. Radomsko was also the first city bombed at dawn of 1 September 1939, ten minutes after Wieluń. Before the war, 25 thousand inhabitants lived in Radomsko, of which 55 percent were Jews.

Along the Museum tour there are signs explaining other places related to the Jewish history of Radomsko...

Soon there will be sixty of them in Radomsko, ten more than there are at present. On the thirteen-kilometre route of visiting The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko, these signs inform about sixty Jewish buildings that once housed the most important Jewish organizations, such as HaPoel, HaKoach, Maccabi, Gwiazda sports clubs, Jewish political parties, Jewish merchant associations, a Jewish bank, famous Jewish institutions such as the Jewish National Fund, Keren Hayessod, Histadrut, as well as philanthropic institutions – „Beis Lechem” and „Gmilat Chessed”. The route also includes information about numerous Jewish schools, kosher hotels, and pre-war restaurants, synagogues, shtiebels, and religious institutions. No other European city can boast such a visitor route as the one offered by The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko. It ensures a journey into the past, to a Jewish world, which once existed in Poland. It also explains the specific Jewish architecture that was created in Poland for specific religious reasons. The Museum does not keep off the subject of war – eleven signs indicate places connected with the Holocaust, such as Umschlagplatz, Judenrat, ghetto, Kommandantur, Gestapo headquarters, description of the way the deportation took place... But let me remind you again – the goal of The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko is to show the pre-war life of Jews.

Does The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko have anything special to offer to young people?

Since its foundation in 2014, the Museum regularly organizes activities directed at young people, such as remembrance marches, starting from the former ghetto to the train station. We give each participant a yellow sticker with the Star of David to stick on their chest, candles and stones to put on the railroad tracks.

Have more tourists appeared in Radomsko since the Museum exists?

For two years, The Kesselman Museum in Radomsko has been visited by small groups of tourists. In the summer, the Museum prepares happenings with Radomsko's scouts and students who show photographs of Jews to them in exactly the same places where they were taken. This action is also well received by Radomsko's citizens. The Chief Rabbi of Poland, ambassadors of Israel, Argentina, and European countries often participate in such activities. I would like to welcome more tourists and the Museum to cooperate with other institutions in Poland and abroad. The Museum is just opening a foundation – I encourage all people of good will to join us in our activities. The Museum also organizes some unique events. These included the celebration of 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, which, apart from Israel, took place only in London, with the participation of the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Israel, and in Radomsko, which were attended by Minister Jarosław Sellin and the Israeli ambassador.

Did your dad talk about his war experiences at home?

I belong to those children survivors of the Holocaust who grew up at a time when Holocaust programmes would already appear on television. There was a lot of talk about war in my home. In the 1980s, the survivors were more inclined to such stories – they simply had time for it, their professional and family life was stabilized. My father always talked to me. I think that it is better for a child when he or she grows up without secrets. It makes him or her stronger, that he or she does not fear anything.

And this great contact with your father, thanks to which you learned so much directly from him about the Holocaust, inspired you to create Yiddele' Memory...

I created the Young Children of the Holocaust Survivors Organization to bring together people

like me. We grew up in different conditions than our older sisters and brothers born shortly after the war, about which a French psychologist of Jewish origin, Nathalie Zajde (a lecturer at the University of Paris specializing in psychological trauma and ethnopsychiatry – editor's note), wrote a book in 2012 „Les enfants caché en France”. These children grew up in quietness, sadness, suffering, and secret, the sudden silence of the adults as they entered the room. Their trauma had its roots in the ignorance of what had happened to their families. They had not heard of the Shoah until they were 15 years old – in France in the 1960s, it was at this age that students learned about the Holocaust. And only then did all the pieces fit together in their heads. It was a totally different case with us. We were the children of fathers who had second, younger wives and who were happy having children with them at the age of 50-60. It was the offspring born in the years 1970-80. Thanks to the Holocaust Survivors, fathers at a more advanced age, we grew up in an atmosphere of openness. I am talking only about the fathers, because 50-60-year-old women could no longer have children. Our fathers did not have any secrets, they told us everything. They wanted to talk, and their children wanted to listen to them.

When was the Yiddele' Memory organization established?

I had founded it in 2010, and in 2011 I came to Radomsko. At that time, I concentrated on creating a museum in this city and I have devoted my life to this project.

Interview by Anna Kilian

Translated by LIDEX (Michał Nowakowski)

