

There are no buildings, no street, no people

The Warsaw Ghetto Museum has published a memoir entitled “Wspomnienia. Moja wersja” [Eng. Memories. My Version] by Izaak (Wacek) Kornblum, a member of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum’s Board of Trustees. I have had the pleasure to talk to the author about his carefree childhood in the Jewish Warsaw before the war, everyday life in the ghetto, hiding in the Białystok region, and return to the homeland

28 July 2020

You were born in Paris in 1926 and your parents brought you to Poland in the 1930s. Do you remember the Jewish Warsaw before the war, when you lived with your family at Śliska Street?

Yes, I do. Those times will never come back. Those buildings, that street ... are not there anymore...

... and those people are gone.

There were cobblestones, shops – mostly Jewish ones, grocery shops and other ones where you could buy everything from soup to nuts; there was a police station on Śliska Street, where I had an unpleasant experience once... My wooden scooter that I used to ride on the pavement got confiscated there. I well remember the National Health Service building on Komitetowa Street and the whole neighborhood because I often played in that street with my friends. My aunt lived nearby on Pańska Street. Another aunt lived on Wielka Street. I was seeing my cousins often. I knew exactly where everything was.

Were your playmates both Jewish and Polish?

Yes, I played with both. I was aware of the differences, but at the time I didn't pay any attention to things like that. It was like that back then.

So it was a neighbourhood where both Poles and Jews lived on good terms with each other?

Yes. There were no unpleasant incidents. I went to a Bund school at 36 Krochmalna Street. I took Twarda Street to get there and that street is practically gone as well; only some small sections of it survived. My school times were carefree.

Before the war broke out, did you sense, like the adults did, that those carefree times are coming to an end? It had been known for a long time that the war was near. Tension was growing, mobilisation began...

But as a boy of ten or eleven I didn't get it then. It was something unfathomable to me.

So September 1939 must have been cataclysmal to you...

Straight from the summer house in Falenica we went to another flat that my parents had bought at Niska Street. There were various issues involved and a lot of attention was paid to them. When the war broke out, we were immediately shocked. The first bombings of Warsaw were directed at wood depots near Niska Street, in Parysów, practically opposite our flat. We escaped back to Śliska Street.

How was it possible?

We wandered around Warsaw for two days, on foot. We had nothing to eat. We sought refuge at my aunt's. We even tried at the shopkeepers' that we used to buy from on Śliska Street. We

survived the actual bombings when some “Stukas” dropped bombs on our house (Junkers Ju-87 “Stuka” dive bombers – editorial note). One of my cousins was killed that day.

Do you remember the moment when you saw a German soldier?

It was after the Germans entered Warsaw. A German motorcycle patrol stopped at the corner of Niska and Dzika Streets and people, mostly Jews, ran up to them to talk in German or Yiddish. Those who did not speak German spoke Yiddish. I ran over there too. It was a normal conversation that lasted 15 minutes. As a young boy, I knew nothing about what had been going on in Germany over the years. Seeing these soldiers up close with their shiny helmets and motorcycles was a real treat for me. The Germans were amicable and answered all of our questions. We weren't scared at all. This very strange story ... took place in the exact spot where a German watch then stood and where the level crossing to Umschlagplatz was built.

When did a German soldier cease to be an attraction and start to be associated with an immediate threat to life?

At first, maybe not to life... there was a period when the Germans started picking people off the street for cleaning jobs. The soldiers used to pick up people to remove the rubble from bombed-out streets. They would make you remove the rubble and carry bricks. I had not witnessed any brutality at the time. Only screaming and hustling. Then the construction of the ghetto walls began. But I didn't see Germans at the construction sites. They ordered the Judenrat (the Jewish Council) to deal with it. The Judenrat provided bricklayers and labourers, and the wall was built section after section.

What was your daily life in the ghetto like?

At first, I participated in the so-called underground education classes. My pre-war teachers conducted them. But it was very short-lived. After that, I worked at home for a while. My father owned a women's handbag workshop and I helped with the work there. It lasted as long as

someone from the so-called Aryan side of the wall would come to collect and sell the bags, and bring the money afterwards. At one point, the situation became worse and it was no longer easy to get into the ghetto. The contact was lost. I had friends in the ghetto that I used to hang out with....

Were they new friends?

Yes, they lived at 35 Niska Street. The family lived not far from us.

Did you have a best friend?

Yes, it was my cousin, Kuba. We suddenly lost touch when the Germans started detaining people during round-ups and sending them to Treblinka. His family – mother and father – moved somewhere else at that time. One day they were detained during a round-up. It seemed as if Kuba had somehow managed to avoid the round-up on Pańska Street. Someone saw him a few times afterwards. And then nobody saw him again. It wasn't unusual. A similar scenario would play out with the majority of my family members and I had a really big family.

Did anyone survive?

No one from Warsaw.

Survivors of the ghetto recall the crowd – 450,000 people gathered in a small space – which can be seen in the photographs, and the ever-present noise produced by that crowd. Do you remember that, too?

Yes, I remember that well. But not all the streets were like that. It applied mostly to the main ones – Karmelicka, Dzika, Gęsia, Smocza, and Pańska. But it wasn't like that on Sienna Street.

Sienna and Śliska Streets comprised the so-called small ghetto –it housed the assimilated

Jews, intellectuals, artists...

It's a generalisation that came much later. But I would agree that a somewhat more progressive people lived on Sienna Street, near Wielka and Złota Streets. Close relatives of my mother's lived in a residential outbuilding on Śliska Street. They were deported from there.

Was life in the so-called small ghetto better than in the large one?

Perhaps, but it wasn't because affluent people lived there. Besides, I don't know if they were affluent... I can't tell – maybe they were. Perhaps the intelligentsia lived on Leszno Street, after all, theatres were open and concerts were held there in the famous Femina Theatre...

But that doesn't mean that people who lived there were more resourceful than others....

No, of course not.

Were there any attempts to get famous and respected people such as scholars, activists, and artists out of the ghetto?

There are different opinions on that. I think there weren't that many more or less organised attempts to save the Jewish elite, and get them out of the ghetto. My father was a writer. His circle of friends included journalists, among others. When things got really bad, he arranged with the help of his uncle, a baker, to allocate bread to those intellectuals with whom he was in contact. As a boy, I never heard of people being extracted from the ghetto on a large scale.

Oh, that reminded me of Władysław Szlengel, who wanted to get out of the ghetto at all costs, and it didn't work out for him....

Some individuals did receive help.

Emanuel Ringelblum, for instance... Any differences between the so-called small and large ghetto were removed by the so-called Grossaktion Warschau. How do you remember that period? At the time, your second mother, Lonia Mileband, was deported from Umschlagplatz – by the way her surname is almost identical to that of the would-be British Prime Minister Ed Milliband of the Labour Party...

We're distantly related. My niece, who lives in London, has tried to contact him but to no avail. But back to the so-called Grossaktion, it changed everything. We started staying in shelters. We didn't sleep in the flat at night. Moving around the ghetto was difficult. I had to find myself a job in a workshop, a fake job, really. In some places you really had to work, but in some other ones you could simply pretend to work. I briefly worked in a workshop on Ogródowa Street. We were supposed to sew there, but that didn't happen. There were three sewing machines in our house which we brought there. My cousin, my mum and I sat by them, and that was it – we just sat by them.

You managed to get out of the ghetto in March 1943. A month before the outbreak of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, did you sense that a military action was in the works? Did you know anyone from the Jewish Combat Organisation or the Jewish Military Union?

Already in January, near us, on the corner of Dzika Street, a column was organised and someone started shooting. Something was in the air, and tension was palpable. I knew a young couple – the son of the uncle (the baker) and his wife. It felt as if they belonged to some kind of organisation. I had heard rumours that they had people come in, demanding money for underground operations, but if that was true, I don't know...

When the uprising broke out, you were already in the Białystok region. Did you hear about the uprising there?

I knew there was an uprising. I heard they're "ending the sheenies." There was no celebration where I was. Those people had their own problems. We didn't talk much. I was taciturn, which turned out to be a big mistake. I kept myself to myself. I didn't see any boys or girls. I didn't have

much opportunity to hear what they were talking about. I believe that the majority of Polish society was indifferent. It's true that they had problems of their own. The chief historian of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, Daniel Blatman – whom I got to know back in Israel – has his own opinion on that. He promotes a view that the Poles and Jews were engaged in social intercourse during the occupation, so to speak. Some kind of action and response mechanism. I don't agree with this view. There was no response from the so-called Aryan side to the misery of the Jewish population. There were some isolated instances of cooperation with the Home Army, the People's Army, or the Council to Aid Jews. But there was no large-scale cooperation, contrary to Blatman's claims. In the final months before the destruction of the ghetto, when many people really needed help from the so-called the Aryan side, they received it sporadically. It was very rare. The whole description of the relationship between both sides, promoted by Mr Blatman is, in my opinion, unrealistic and untrue. There was no dialogue in the broad sense. There wasn't much help. Quite the opposite. The people on the so-called Aryan side, in general, were reluctant to provide any help whatsoever and more likely to inform on you. Any assistance was an "occasional" and not a "common" thing – mainly in the form of money or arms. But, in general, the Poles were unsympathetic. In the programme of the Museum, on the other hand, the opposite is true – cooperation is given the top spot.

What kind of man was Stanisław Śliwowski, who gave you a job in the Białystok region?

He was good by nature. Uneducated, quite wealthy by the standards back then, due to the number of hectares of land he owned. He was good and very friendly towards Jews, because before the outbreak of the war he fancied a Jewish woman.

Such sentiments stay with you for ever...

Yes. He wanted to save her, dig a shelter beneath his kitchen and take her and her family in. But her parents refused and the whole family perished in the Sokoły Ghetto.

Did Polish-Jewish relations change after the war? In the book you recall a meeting, on 17 February 1945, on the road behind Sokoły, with "people from some underground

organisation.” Local Jews who survived the war lived in the building. Seven people, including a four-year-old girl and a thirteen-year-old boy, were murdered...

It was a Home Army unit.

You left Poland in 1957. Why?

It was the time of the official campaign against Jews in the press and on the radio, no one was even pretending otherwise. They started calling us the “fifth column.” The atmosphere grew hostile. At my place of work – the Ministry of Internal Trade – meetings were held all the time and my colleagues started screaming: “so let them get out of here.” That was my experience and I know similar a thing happened to many others. My little brother, Ber, left for Israel as a child. People started encouraging me to go too, and promising help. But my wife and I – and my father as well – we all grew up on Mickiewicz and Sienkiewicz. I had a huge Polish book collection. We felt at home in Poland, we were culturally assimilated, but things got really unpleasant. So, we left. It wasn’t easy. My wife’s father, who worked at an American Embassy before the war, lived in America. When it was evacuated, its employees were also extracted. It wasn’t a move to the country of our dreams, but somehow, we got used to living there. We had no contact with Poland. Sometimes I managed to send \$20 to Stanisław, that’s all I could do. There was a Polish bookshop in Tel Aviv, where you could buy newspapers and books. In 1968, friends came from the Gdańsk Railway Station. In the 1980s, you could come to Poland “to see the sights.” We came in 1987. We also went to Germany and Austria. I got a job offer in Poland from an American company that was building large food industry facilities here – those were the times of Balcerowicz, a period of transformation. I came here for a year, and then they kept extending my job contract. My wife and I were happy.

You returned to your homeland...

I returned.

Interview conducted by Anna Kilian

Photo The Warsaw Ghetto Museum

Publication date: 2020-08-03

Print date: 2022-03-11 22:31

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/there-are-no-buildings-no-street-no-people/>