

Warsaw, Trawniki or Luninets? The fate of Mieczysław Wajnberg's family during World War II

In May 2021, the Commission for Municipal Naming of the Warsaw City Council (Komisja do spraw Nazewnictwa Miejskiego Rady m.st. Warszawy) decided to give one of Warsaw's streets the name of Mieczysław Wajnberg. Almost half a year earlier, a commemorative plaque was hung on the façade of the house at 66 Żelazna Street, informing that *Mieczysław Weinberg, a world-famous composer of Jewish origin, was born in that house. From 1943 he was living and composing in Moscow. His works include cantatas, symphonies, concertos, string quartets and sonatas. He became famous for his opera "The Passenger", which addresses the crimes committed by the Nazis in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. Until the end of his life, he associated himself with Polish culture, his Jewish heritage and his hometown.*

Mieczysław Wajnberg in the Warsaw of the roaring 20s and 30s

I was born in Warsaw, graduated from the Warsaw Conservatoire, grew up on Polish poetry and in an environment that worshipped Chopin's music. The ashes of my father, my mother and my sister, who were murdered by the fascists during World War II, are buried in suffering-stricken Poland – this is how Mieczysław Wajnberg described himself in an article published in "Sowietskaja muzika" in 1969.

The composer was born on 8 December 1919, almost at the dawn of Poland's independence. His father, Szmul (Samuel) Wajnberg, was a violinist and a conductor who led theatre orchestras. In the 1920s he was in charge of the Jewish music department at the Syrena Records label. Records

on which one can listen to Wajnberg's father directing the orchestra and as a solo violinist have survived to the present day. However, we know much less about the composer's mother. Her name was Sara or Sura Dwojra and she was likely to be associated with Jewish venues: as an actor or pianist. She may have used a pseudonym or maiden name Sara Kotlicka. The actress Sonia Wajnberg also performed in Jewish theatres in Warsaw, although her family connection to Szmul Wajnberg remains unclear. Mieczysław also had a musically talented younger sister Estera (born in 1921), who just like her older brother, played the piano.

Wajnberg's son began working as a pianist at a very early age, helping the family through the difficult crisis years of the 1930s. He was just over 11 years old at the time. Years later, he would recall his childhood and youth, which passed between playing at traditional Jewish weddings and bar mitzvahs, practising classical repertoire in classes at the Conservatoire and... performing in well-known nightclubs like "Oasis" or "Adria", where he played popular dance tunes. Loda Halama herself wrote appreciatively about the young pianist. They first met on a film set: a dancer with a legendary figure and beautiful legs was the star of "Freddie Makes the World Happy" (Fredek uszczęśliwia świat), while Mieczysław worked on the music track. They also worked together during live stage performances, Wajnberg was the pianist who accompanied Loda Halama on her tour.

The wartime fate of the Wajnberg family

The wartime fate of the twenty-year-old Mietek is quite well-known: he was able to get through to the Soviet Union and reached Minsk, where he graduated from a conservatoire. After the Third Reich attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, he was able to leave Belarus. He arrived in Tashkent, where he married Natalia Wowski-Michoels, daughter of the well-known actor and Jewish theatre director Solomon Michoels. In 1943 the young couple moved to Moscow, which became the composer's new home. Mieczysław Wajnberg lived there until his death in 1996. However, it is not known where his father, mother and younger sister Estera died, as the Wajnberg family split up during World War II.

The dominant version of events presented by the Russian press was that the family separated in

Warsaw at the beginning of September 1939. After more than 50 years, Mieczysław Wajnberg recounted how he left the city on 6 September together with his sister, after an evening concert at the “Adria” and a night’s discussion with his mother. He made his way to the border alone and found himself in a group of refugees waiting to be let into the USSR.

The official version

We have reached the demarcation line. On one side stood the Nazi troops, on the other the Soviet border guards – was how Ludmiła Nikitina reported the composer’s memoirs in the 1994 issue of the journal “Muzykalnaja akademija”. A unit was organised to check documents. They did it carelessly because there were a lot of people waiting in line. When they approached me, they asked: “Surname?” – “Wajnberg” – “First name?” – “Mieczysław” – “What is Mieczysław? A Jew?” – “A Jew” – “Then you will be Mojsej.”

However, his family and friends called him Mietek. In the mid-1980s, the composer managed to officially “recover” his name by changing his personal data. It was not easy because, as he confessed in an interview, he had no birth certificate and the archives had burned down. Did these missing documents actually include the name Mieczysław? Several years ago, musicologist Danuta Gwizdalanka managed to find a birth certificate that had survived in the documents of the Chopin University of Music. Wajnberg entered the conservatoire in 1931, and his application contained the name Mojsze. Either way, the composer wanted to be called and remembered as Mieczysław, who began his career in the Warsaw of the 1930s.

Source information on the circumstances under which the composer left Warsaw in 1939 and when he parted ways with his family are equally ambiguous. In the USSR it was officially written and said that Wajnberg’s parents did not want to leave Warsaw. However, family history contains more details that contradict this: stories recall that the four Wajnbergs stayed in a camp, where they waited for a permit to enter the USSR, but did not receive it. According to the story, only Mietek managed to get on the train that took him abroad.

On the other hand, Natalia, the composer’s first wife, recalled that the Wajnbergs intended to

leave Warsaw together, and only separated when marching in a column of refugees. His parents and Ester stayed behind because her heel broke and they didn't want to leave the girl alone. As a consequence, they missed the train by which Mietek travelled alone and tried to cross the border on his own. Perhaps Mieczyslaw and those closest to him self-censored their official statements and biographies – openly stating the fact that the USSR refused to help some of the Jews fleeing the Nazi system could have landed him in trouble. Keeping silent about painful experiences during youth may also have been a strategy for coping with trauma. Wajnberg was reluctant to talk about his past and the loss of loved ones during the Holocaust, but he addressed these themes when composing music.

What did Mieczysław Wajnberg know?

The composer himself believed that his parents died in the Warsaw Ghetto. He later learned that they were taken to a ghetto in Łódź and then to a labour camp in Trawniki. At least, this is what emerges from his interviews and the documents found by his biographers. This is worth remembering when listening to the 21st symphony – the last one he completed before his death. The work is subtitled “Kaddish” and is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. The Kaddish, one of the most important prayers in Judaism, is recited, among other things, during mourning ceremonies.

Apparently, information about the deportation of his father to Trawniki was given to the composer by a former Warsaw neighbour. Mieczysław met him during his stay in Warsaw in 1966 at the “Warsaw Autumn” festival. To this day, this information has not been confirmed. It is true that among the lists of artists residing in the Warsaw Ghetto, the name Wajnberg does appear, but this information rather concerns the actor Janek Wajnberg and the actress Sonia Wajnberg, possibly Szmul's sister or the first wife of Mieczysław's father. Among others, Emanuel Ringelblum, historian and creator of the Warsaw Ghetto Archive, was sent to the labour camp in Trawniki, which operated on the site of a pre-war sugar factory. So far, however, it has not been possible to confirm whether anyone from the composer's closest family was in fact sent to this camp.

The Wajnbergs in Luninets

There is another story about the death of the Wajnberg family – it can be found in Zalmen Zylbercwaig's "Lexicon of Yiddish Theatre". According to this version, Szmul Wajnberg ran a cinema orchestra during the war and was murdered in Luninets, in the region of Polesia. It is a village located about 60 km east of Pinsk.

Until September 1939 Luniniec belonged to Poland, then it was occupied by the Red Army and incorporated into the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic as so-called Western Belarus. From July 1941, the town was under German occupation and already in the summer of that year mass murders of the Jewish population took place in the area of Moguł wilderness. During that time, mainly adult men other than artisans were killed. However, between March and September 1942, a ghetto was created in the area, where approximately 3,000 Jews were housed, one third of whom were refugees. They were all murdered in the area of Borowszczyzna wilderness.

However, the Wajnbergs may have been among the Jews allowed into the USSR, and their artistic experience and qualifications aroused the interest of the authorities looking for intellectuals and artists of Jewish origin among the refugees. They were sent to work according to their qualifications. There is a story about young musicians from the Warsaw Conservatoire who, after escaping to an area under USSR occupation, initially worked in a sawmill in the Baranavichy region. On a particular day, one of them: Henryk Wagner played the piano and was consequently sent to Minsk.

Young Wajnberg was also supposed to be in this group, and Baranavichy is located just over 100 km north of Luninets, where Wajnberg senior was supposed to work. By the end of 1939, Mieczysław was already in Minsk, continuing his musical studies at the local conservatoire. On 21 June 1941 there was a performance of his diploma composition entitled "Symphonic Poem" (Chromatic symphony). A day later, the Third Reich launched "Operation Barbarossa", an attack on the USSR.

One can guess that it was in the region of Polesia, and not in Warsaw, that the Wajnberg family

met for the last time. The manuscript of one of the piano sonatas composed by Mieczysław (op. 5) bears a dating annotation: Luninets 1940, while musicologists and historians are trying to find further confirmation of the Wajnbergs' wartime fate by searching archives relating to the beginnings of Mieczysław's career in the USSR.

Mieczysław Wajnberg returns to Warsaw

I was not surprised that he started reminiscing about Warsaw of his youth, about the pre-war streets, cafés and restaurants he frequented and probably played in – recalls a Polish diplomat, Eugeniusz Mielcarek – he asked me how do they look now, what's going on there. But most of the places that Wajnberg recalled from his memory, with phenomenal precision and accuracy, were wiped off the city map by the turmoil of war. This conversation took place at the end of 1994, 14 months before the composer's death, and is recalled in the biography written by Danuta Gwizdalanka.

Warsaw, Trawniki or Luninets? Perhaps it will never be possible to dispel all doubts about the wartime fate of Mieczysław Wajnberg's family, as it is difficult to verify memories and scraps of data that have been preserved in archives and human memory. However, it is possible to take a look at present-day Warsaw and tell the composer what his city looks like nowadays. Having a street whose patron is Mieczysław Wajnberg is a good idea to start such a story.

Agnieszka Kuś

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