

You can sometimes see a glimmer of kindness in bad people

About a family that lived in Poland for 400 years, the lives of relatives in the ghetto and work in Schultz's manufacturing plant, Hotel Polski, the Australian nostalgia for the „Old Country” we are talking with J. John Mann, Professor of Translational Neuroscience, among others Vice-Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University and Director of Research and Director of Molecular Imaging and the Neuropathology Division at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

What are your Warsaw roots? How is your family connected with Warsaw?

John Mann: My mother's family comes from southern Spain. It was involved in the production of wine there. By virtue of the Alhambra Decree, the family was expelled from there in 1492. Then it settled in Poland, where it lived for several hundred years, most probably four hundred.

Have you really been able to trace back the history of your family up to Renaissance times?

J.M.: First, we have an original document ordering to leave Spain. Secondly, the Jews did not have surnames at the time. And if they already had them, they were related to the place where they lived. My mother's family left Spain shortly before the final date of exile, probably guessing that nothing good was awaiting them there. I think they went to Morocco, because that's what the family name has been until present – Maroko (Polish for Morocco). There were rabbis in Poland with such a surname, and all of them from one family. We commissioned the creation of a family tree that dates as far back as the early 19th century. Previous history is only presumed history and it is based on guesses.

Where did your family live in Poland?

J.M.: Both of my parents were born in Warsaw. My father's family – the Arbusmans – moved to this city from Russia three generations back. They were successful here, they collected a lot of money – at the beginning of the 20th century they owned large land areas in the vicinity of Gdańsk, which was quite unusual for Jews. My father's brothers and he himself were educated there and lived there. They did not go to school – they had a teacher, a melamed. The family was Orthodox. A lot of people had always lived at home. My father told me that the average number of people eating a meal at the table had been twenty, although the family itself had numbered only five people – the parents and three children. The cousins lived with them... After World War I, the family moved to Warsaw. My mum lived here. Her family was different – there were Hasidim in it. My mother's father was a bit more modern and decided that his children had to have a modern education. My mother's brother studied law, and my mother studied dentistry at the university. My father, on the other hand, studied law. My brother and dad's sister – also dentistry. It seems to me that his sister studied together with my mum and thanks to that my parents met. They were both very involved in Warsaw's Jewish life, especially my father who was a cosmopolite. My parents graduated from universities with excellent results. My father was granted a scholarship to complete his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne, but he rejected the offer because he didn't want to leave Poland. Unfortunately... Mum, as I have already mentioned, was also a great student. In those days, Jewish students had to sit at the benches at the back of the auditorium...

In 1937, the ghetto bench laws were introduced in Poland. Jews had no right to choose places in the lecture halls...

J.M.: Well, that's how it was called in Poland – the ghetto benches... When the session was held, Jewish students were forced to stand in the back of the hall and they couldn't see anything. Being a Jew created problems.

Regarding access to higher education, following the death of Marshal Piłsudski even greater problems arose after the introduction of restrictions in the form of numerus clausus and proposals regarding numerus nullus... Starting from 1937, both doctors and lawyers had to deal with great difficulties in practicing their professions.

J.M.: I didn't know about that. Maybe that's why she studied dentistry. In 1936, my father was already a graduate and he had a job. My parents got married in the Warsaw ghetto.

And where did they live before the war?

J.M.: My mum lived in a small apartment with her parents in the area of the future ghetto – it was an unwealthy family, and my father in a much better neighborhood, near the Saxon Garden. His office was located on Królewska Street. The building was destroyed during the war.

Rabbi David Berman: Do you know the addresses?

J.M.: Yes. I have them in my computer.

In 1940 your father had to move to the ghetto...

J.M.: Just like every Warsaw Jew. And so, my parents got married in the ghetto in 1942 or in the beginning of 1943.

Have any documents certifying the marriage – ketubah survived?

J.M.: No. After leaving the ghetto my parents were taken to the Bergen-Belsen camp. They had several documents with them, including mum's diploma of completing her dentistry studies. I have read and seen in films that Jews also tried to live in the ghetto as they had used to. That's why my parents got married when it was still possible to do it in the traditional way, under the huppah.

How did your parents manage to get out of the ghetto?

J.M.: They escaped over to the other side of the wall, to the so-called „Aryan side”.

Did any Poles help them?

J.M.: Mum was very interested in education about the Holocaust. She pointed out to the necessity of avoiding tarring all Poles with the same brush. She told me a few stories of how she escaped death during the war. At the beginning of the occupation, she decided to visit her father in Warsaw, and she had been out of the capital at that time. She did not have the proper documents, and had a very Semitic look. Two German soldiers approached her at the railway station and demanded that she show the papers to them. Mum did not know what to do, she pretended to be looking for them, and then a Polish railway station manager who was observing the situation ran up and grabbed her arm saying, „Where have you been, I've been looking all over for you, you were supposed to be here long ago!". He suspected what was about to happen soon and saved her life. This is one example of unselfish help. Another time in the ghetto there was a roundup and armed soldiers with dogs lined up in two rows on both sides of the cross-street, stopping everyone in the street full of people. It was in Nowolipie, where Schultz's manufacturing plant was located and where mum was heading. The entrance was guarded by two German soldiers. Mum was convinced that this was her end. She decided that she would try to walk between them as if nothing had happened, as if she had the documents on her – maybe they would not halt her... One of the soldiers, with almost transparent blue eyes, looked at her as if – my mother clearly remembers that look until today – he was looking through her and he didn't make a move. Mum walked into the manufacturing plant. She is convinced that at that moment the soldier decided that he would let her get away. A woman hiding my parents on the other side of the wall was not doing it out of the goodness of her heart. She did it for the money. She lived in Nowolipie Street, in a building from which one could see the ghetto's gate. Before entering, there was an artillery emplacement, aimed at the ghetto, and German soldiers. My parents were in a room on one of the upper floors, so not only did they see these soldiers from above, but also a large portion of the ghetto. In her accounts, my mum described what she had seen at the time – fighting in the ghetto, burning of the ghetto, aimed at making people leave the hiding places, and its total destruction. My parents saw everything from the beginning, from the first fires. Germans retreating, then returning, soldiers shooting and blowing everything up – the entire uprising from the beginning to the very end. They had nothing else to do – they sat at the window and looked through it.

Was there a hideout in the apartment?

J.M.: No. My parents were not hiding at all. They were just staying in this room. The woman who was hiding them would drink all the time and leave the apartment door open. She told them she had been doing that on purpose, so that if the Germans came and found my parents, she would be drunk as usual, and she would say that anyone taking advantage of her intoxication could enter the apartment without her knowing about it.

It was very clever of her... And what happened to the rest of your family?

J.M.: My aunt – my father's sister – and his mother were hiding somewhere else, also for money. Then they found themselves on the so-called Palestinian list of Hotel Polski. The cousins, who lived in Poland at the grandparents' house, decided about the Aliyah in the 1920s. It was them that saved my parents' lives. Thanks to them, the list included the surnames of four members of my family before it fell into the hands of the Gestapo. After a short stay in Hotel Polski, the Germans took them away. My father's brother got married to a young girl from a very rich family. Her father-in-law paid for a large part of the family to be on the list. He got from father's brother, Szmul – after whom one of my sons bears his name – a postcard saying: „I'm going to a place from where nobody returns”. I think he meant Auschwitz. He was never seen again. My paternal grandfather was murdered at the Umschlagplatz. One day my parents got there too, but they managed to escape – but I don't know when and how it happened. My father's sister was very tall, she was about 180 cm tall – it was a lot in Poland. My grandfather was also very tall, he stood out – a German soldier shot him in the street. Father, his brother, and grandmother – my father's mother – survived. After the war, they moved to Australia, where I was born. My grandmother died when I was 15, so I remember her very well. Everyone in my family is physically very similar to each other, it's really amazing! My father was also a very talented artist, a great graphic artist, and sportsman. He was the Polish bobsleigh champion and he was in the top 12 Polish table tennis players, he also played in one of the best volleyball teams.

He was a very versatile man...

J.M.: Indeed, an outstanding lawyer and sportsman, a very gifted person. My mum told me that he and his brother sailed on the Vistula River. He led a very active life.

Rabbi David Berman: But, above all, he was a lawyer...

J.M.: Yes, he specialized in international law. He worked in an office that represented the governments of other states and foreign enterprises, as well as the interests of Polish companies abroad. I have my father's photographs taken in many countries, which was connected with his business trips – in London, Paris, India...

How does your family recall life in Poland before the war? Was it happy here?

J.M.: Yes! Especially, my father's family. His cousin named Rajchman was minister of trade in Piłsudski's government (Henryk Janusz Floyar-Rajchman was the minister of trade and industry in the years 1934-35, chartered major of infantry in the Polish Army of the Second Polish Republic, in 1939 he evacuated 75 tons of gold from the Polish Bank's reserves to France – editor's note). To be able to hold this position, he had to change his religion. Piłsudski did not want a Jew in his government. First, he offered my father a job in the ministry when he graduated from the university. He saw great potential in him. But my father refused to convert. My father would always say that he was a Polish Jew, not a Jewish Pole. His office was located on Królewska Street.

Did your family have Christian friends or did they rather maintain relationships only with the Jewish community?

J.M.: My father was constantly in touch with Christians at work.

But did he have any closer relations with them?

J.M.: I don't know. I grew up in Melbourne, which had the highest percentage of Holocaust Survivors among its population. On Sundays, everyone would visit each other and reminisced about the „Old Country”.

Nostalgia...

J.M.: Yes, it was nostalgia. It was in Poland, as they would say, where they had a wonderful life. It was hard for them in Australia. They arrived there without a cent; they reckoned this country did not have a sufficiently high level of culture. And even when their lives had become better, they did not cease talking about Poland. It was the best in Poland, in Warsaw.

Did they speak Yiddish?

J.M.: Yes, of course. And I had to learn to speak and write in Yiddish. My mother would take me to the theater where they acted in Yiddish. She considers the preservation of this language as something of great importance. Polish was also spoken at home, so I understand Polish. My father, due to the fact that he grew up in the area of Gdańsk, also spoke excellent German, and so his Yiddish had a lot of German influence. After the war my mother could not stand it when my father spoke Yiddish, because of this German accent. Mum graduated from a dental school in Australia, she worked as a dentist and talked with her patients in Yiddish. I did not always understand the nostalgia of the Australian Jews. Warsaw was a city with sophisticated culture, but the families of my friends came from small villages – life there had to be terrible, poor, unpaved streets, but they still recalled everything with great nostalgia. For my father Warsaw was marvelous, but what about the others...? If not for the war, my family would never have left Poland. Its members worked in the parliament. We were part of this country's history; we had lived here for 400 years. We had the right to be its citizens to the same extent as Poles. My attitude has changed over the years, now I'm firmer in my opinions. My grandfather was the owner of several real estates in Warsaw.

Do you know where?

J.M.: Of course, I do. My family gave a lot to Poland. We didn't sit and do nothing. Yes, we had many rabbis in the family who served only the Jewish community, but many people worked for Poland holding responsible positions. Poland has obligations towards its citizens, including my family.

Did you manage to visit places in Warsaw connected with your family?

J.M.: Yes. This is my third visit to this city.

What were your impressions the first time?

J.M.: I felt strange the first time. With each next stay the place seemed friendlier to me. I am not fooling myself – there is much anti-Semitism here, and the Polish state is very ambivalent in its approach to Jewish property, which also applies to all citizens and former citizens.

Rabbi David Berman: Have you experienced any anti-Semitism here first-hand?

J.M.: Never. I am always treated with friendliness and respect.

Rabbi David Berman: There is so much talk about Polish anti-Semitism, and I have not experienced it here either. For four years, since I have been living here, I have heard only one anti-Semitic comment that I might as well have heard anywhere else in the world.

Anti-Semitism has revived in today's Europe, and it's biting...

J.M.: I cannot say anything negative about my stays here in Poland. But, I will tell you something interesting. I had a lecture for the Polish Psychiatric Association in Zakopane. After the evening party, an entertainment part was planned. They announced a singer and comedian in one person. I was sitting in the first row between the current and former President of the Association. The comedian enters and the current President tells me: „You will definitely like him, he is an incredibly funny guy, he plays the guitar, he was born in Russia, but he lives in Poland.” The comedian announces that he will tell sets of jokes: Russian, Polish, and Jewish...

It's a standard.

J.M.: Really?

Usually in this type of jokes there is talk about a Russian or a German, a Pole, and a Jew, and the point is to show who is the wisest or the smartest of them all. And depending on the ethnic configuration – when a Jew is found among the three „protagonists” of the joke, then he is the wisest one. Usually, it is a rabbi, a wise man.

J.M.: I see! And I got unnecessarily scared then – What will happen now? What should I do when the guy starts telling a horrible „Jewish” joke, full of stereotypical judgments? Should I sit and pretend to be amused, or get up and leave?... I was probably the only Jew in the room. And so, it was the turn for the Jewish joke. It was about a tsar who wanted to reduce every prison sentence by 50 percent. In one village a man was sentenced to life imprisonment. The inhabitants of the village did not know how to get out of the situation, and how to fulfil the tsarist decree. They went to the wisest man in the village – the rabbi. The rabbi said it was very simple – let the man spend one day of his life in prison and the next in liberty, and over and over again, until his death.

Rabbi David Berman: Let’s get back to one of the previous themes. Your father worked in Schultz’s manufacturing plant on Nowolipie Street. Did he share any details of this period with you? Schultz was an industrialist from Gdańsk. One of the managers of the plant was the previous owner of the place – a shoe factory and a leather warehouse, and a tannery – a Varsovian Avraham Hendel. He employed religious Jews in the manufacturing plant to protect them...

J.M.: At this moment I don’t recall anything in particular. Besides that, it seems to me that my father’s siblings worked there as well and that’s why they managed to survive in the ghetto and avoid the deportations.

Rabbi David Berman: How did your mother survive without any documents?

J.M.: With difficulty. I think she was registered in the ghetto, but I’m not sure. Maybe she married

father to protect herself, but I don't think so because they were very devoted to each other and involved with each other. I really don't know how my mum managed to survive – she certainly didn't have the necessary documents.

Rabbi David Berman: In what words were the Polish Christians spoken of on those Sunday afternoons in Melbourne when the „Old Country” was reminisced about?

J.M.: An interesting question... Some people were probably angry because they had had bad experiences. My mother was always different. She always focused on the responsibility of the individual. Many people tolerate ambiguity in behavior. You can sometimes see a glimmer of kindness in bad people. I think that some survivors, participants of the Sunday meetings in Melbourne, really feared their Polish neighbors and probably had good reasons for that. But, probably I'm not the right person to talk about it.

Interview by Anna Kilian and rabbi David Berman