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FEDOMEN GETTA ŁÓDZKIEGO

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BETWEEN HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY: MEMORIES FROM POSTWAR ŁÓDZ

I left Łódź for Israel as a boy of 14, in early 1950 and returned to Poland after 37 years, in the spring of 1987. I was staying mainly in Warsaw. One day I travelled with my friend Karol to Łódź. It was easter Monday, a grey, cold and drizzly morning. I distinctly remembered all those years the location of the house where we have lived in Łódź after the War. I often thought and even dreamt about that house on the corner of Gdańska and 1 Maja. The street was now completely deserted. Nothing but dilapidated buildings and dark-gray courtyards. The sight was depressing. When I approached "my" house, I became dizzy and experienced an eerie sense of being catapulted back in time. I started checking the list of tenants, as if expecting to find somebody I had known there almost four decades earlier. I did the same thing in a neighboring building where friends of ours used to live. A group of teenagers was standing farther back in the courtyard. Suddenly, I was all wet. A bucketful of ice-cold water was running down my neck. I was instantly hurled back into postwar Łódź. I was being chased by Polish teenagers. I sensed fear. Karol apologized and reminded me of the age-old Polish custom of "wet Easter Monday." Still, I could not overcome a sense of terror, humiliation and rage. I related the "Łódź incident" in the first chapter of my book *Together and Apart in Brzezany*, dealing with my childhood in Brzezany and with my return to Poland and Ukraine.¹

My Łódź project intends to reconstruct my intimate, personal past as well as the wider historical context of the early postwar years in Łódź. I would like to use the approach which proved quite successful in my Brzezany project: to combine three major elements: historian's conventional sources such as archives, periodicals and memoirs; oral history, i.e. interviews with persons who lived in Łódź in the early postwar years; and autobiographical materials. Wilhelm Dichter, whose literary talent surpasses my abilities, described his life as a child in eastern Galicia during the War and as a youngster in postwar Warsaw.² I would like to emulate him in my own way. What will follow is a few short fragments and impressions of postwar Łódź. I am still at the stage of collecting information and contemplating the structure of what I hope to result in a book.

¹ Sh. Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, 1919-1945*, Indiana UP 2002, pp. 9-10.

² W. Dichter, *Koń Pana Boga*, Kraków 2000; idem, *Szkoła bezbożników*, Kraków 1999.

Lodz was the most significant urban center in immediate postwar Poland, not only in the general, Polish sense, but also for the surviving and returning Jews. While the capital, Warsaw, was almost completely ruined, Lodz was unscathed by the War and relatively safe for Jews. It is quite natural, then, that many Jews settled for shorter or longer periods of time in this city. Still, a basic feature of Jewish existence and activity in Lodz, as well as throughout Poland, was a temporary and transitory way of life.

The Jewish population in postwar Lodz was in a constant flux. People were on the move, arriving and departing. Still, a differentiation should be made between the majority of those Jews who considered their stay in Lodz as an interim step before departing for further points beyond Poland's borders, and a minority, who strived to reconstruct their lives in postwar Poland.

The estimate of the size of the Jewish population in postwar Lodz poses serious problems. As a result of research conducted by the late Lucjan Dobroszycki and Dr. Leszek Olejnik we have some data and estimates.³ The most outstanding feature of Jewish demography in postwar Lodz is its fluidity. The Jews of postwar Lodz formed a community in flux. In early March 1945, i.e. less than 2 months after liberation, 5.5 thousand Jews were registered at the Temporary Jewish Committee (TKŻ). However, in the summer of 1945 that number jumped to more than 20 thousand. In the fall the number apparently increased to 24–27 thousand and they constituted at that time between 5–6% of the total population. Dobroszycki estimated that the Jews of Lodz and Lodz Province (the overwhelming majority lived in the city), formed about 40% of all Jews in Poland in 1945. In the summer of 1946, in spite of the fact that many of those Jews who arrived in Lodz left it, there were in Lodz circa 30 thousand Jews. In the late forties the estimated number of Lodz Jews was 15–20 thousand, and after the emigration wave of 1950, between 10–15 thousand Jews remained in Lodz. A significant demographic question is not only how many Jews resided in Lodz at a given point in time but also: how many Jews passed through Lodz in the postwar years. It is perhaps possible to work out a statistical estimate based on the existing data. I wouldn't be surprised if such an estimate would indicate that every second or third Jew in postwar Poland resided in Lodz for various periods of time.⁴

In order to get some feel for what it was for a Jew to live in postwar Lodz, let's advance from demographic and statistical data to vivid personal recollections.

Henryk Grynberg, then a youngster of nine, arrived in Lodz two or three months after the liberation. He recalled that

dark-gray houses stood firmly in a straight line, covered by prewar dust. Trams had blue painted windows, which made them quite attractive. Store windows displayed wares from American and British parcels. More and more people were arriving in Lodz, where it was easier to start a new

³ L. Dobroszycki, "Restoring Jewish Life in Post-War Poland," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 3, 1973, No. 2, pp. 59–60; L. Olejnik, "Społeczność Żydowska w Łodzi w latach 1945–1950, zarys problemu," *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis, Folia Historica* 60, 1997, pp. 125–129.

⁴ According to Olejnik, circa 60 thousand Jews were aided by the Jewish Lodz District Committee (WKZ) in the years 1945–1947. L. Olejnik, "Wojewódzki Komitet Żydowski w Łodzi – powstanie i główne kierunki działalności (1945–1950)," *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 1998, No. 3(187), p. 22.

life. Most of the newcomers were Jewish. We used to walk the streets with Isaac and examine bypassers. When we spotted somebody who looked pale and emaciated, with sad eyes, we used to stop him and ask – Amchu? If he didn't know the meaning of the word we would apologize and run away. However, at times, the man would stop and cry out – yes, Amchu! and we would be utterly happy.⁵

S. L. Schneiderman, an American-Jewish journalist who visited Lodz in the summer of 1946, wrote:

As a whole, Lodz had not changed. It was the same city of stone, without a patch of green, and with bare red chimneys reaching to the ever clouded sky. The main artery of Lodz, seven-mile long Piotrkowska Street was now once again bustling and noisy. The stores are open, the cafes lively, the streetcars crowded. When I arrived in Lodz, it had the largest Jewish community in liberated Poland.⁶

In spite of the Holocaust trauma and the temporariness of life, there persisted an atmosphere of intensity and vitality. Jewish life was multifaceted: from Jewish communal and religious activities through the socialist Bund and to the mass Zionist movement, divided into numerous parties and youth organizations.

In the general, Polish sense, postwar Lodz, in spite of wartime changes and a considerable shrinkage of its German population (by both, flight preceding, and deportation following the liberation of the city), was to a considerable extent a continuation of prewar Lodz. Most of the prewar urban scene was intact and the majority of its Polish population, apparently, still residing there, although many "outsiders," particularly intellectuals, artists and Party-people settled there and stayed for a few years. The Jewish scene changed drastically: less than one thousand local Jews survived in the ghetto area. Holocaust researchers assume that between 5–8 thousand Lodz Jews survived the camps. Some of them returned to their native city. Other Lodz Jews, who lived during the War in the Soviet Union also started returning. It seems, however, that the majority of those Jews who lived in the city during the immediate postwar years, were complete newcomers.⁷

Organized Jewish life in postwar Lodz was concentrated in the center of town. Its parameters were approximately: Plac Wolności in the North, Narutowicza in the South, Gdańska in the West and Kilińskiego in the East. The majority of Jewish institutions and organizations were located along Gdańska, Śródmiejska (today Więckowskiego), Południowa (today Rewolucji 1905), Wschodnia, Cegielniana, Jaracza, Wólczańska, Zawadzka (today Próchnika), Zachodnia, Kilińskiego and Narutowicza.⁸ We may assume that Jews

⁵ H. Grynberg, *Zwycięstwo*, Poznań 1990, pp. 53–55, 58–59. English translation – mine (Sh. R.).

⁶ S. L. Schneiderman, *Between Fear and Hope*, New York 1947, pp. 154–155, 158.

⁷ For estimates of Germans who left Lodz see: L. Olejnik, "Łódź wielonarodowa w pierwszych latach po drugiej wojnie światowej," *Rocznik Łódzki*, 1998, No. 45, pp. 187, 193. For an estimate of Jewish Lodz survivors in the camps see: *International Herald Tribune*, August 2004.

⁸ *Książka adresowa. Łódź, urzędowa, społeczna, przemysłowo-handlowa, 1947*. Polska Agencja Prasowa PAP, pp. 30–31. I am very much indebted to Mr. Ryszard Bonisiawski for showing me the locations of various Jewish institutions in postwar Lodz. For the prewar "human ecology" of Lodz see: P. Samuś, *Łódź – mała ojczyzna Polaków, Niemców, Żydów*, [in:] *Polacy – Niemcy – Żydzi w Łodzi w XIX–XX. Sąsiedzi bliscy i dalecy*, ed. P. Samuś, Łódź 1997, pp. 129–130.

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and Jewish institutions in postwar Lodz resided in either ex-German or in prewar Jewish apartments in the center of the city. Most of my interviewees stated that it was relatively easy to find lodging in empty post-German apartments.

Jewish public events of various sorts followed one another. I would like to sample here just some of them, dating from mid-May to early July 1945, within the first half year after the liberation of Lodz.⁹

May 18: Rachel Auerbach, reading excerpts from her wartime Holocaust writings at the Związek Literatów, Dziennikarzy i Artystów Żydowskich w Polsce, located on Narutowicza 32.

May 19–20: concerts by the singers Diana Blumenfeld and Dido Epstein at the theatre hall of "Sala Śpiewaków." It is reported that huge crowds attended these performances.

June 3: a celebration (akademia) commemorating Shalom Aleichem took place at the "Sala Śpiewaków."

June 16: The prewar Yiddish film "Mayn shtetele Belz" was screened in the "Włókniarz" cinema hall, on Zawadzka street.

June 17: Adolf Berman spoke to an audience at the "Bałtyk" cinema hall. Chayele Rozental, a young Jewish singer from the Vilna Ghetto performed on that day at the "Sala Śpiewaków."

July 2: a commemoration of Herzl and Bialik took place at the newly opened "Hechalutz House."

July 8: a celebration (akademia) took place at the "Sala Śpiewaków." There were speeches and artists performed. One of the speakers was Yitzhak (Antek) Zuckerman.

Literary life, the arts and entertainment were quite lively in postwar Lodz, which for a while acted as a substitute for the capital. To get some idea of the most popular form of mass entertainment – film showings – I would like to present some data: 16 cinemas functioned during the immediate period after liberation, i.e. March–December 1945. Circa 4.7 million tickets were sold during that time. The average inhabitant of Lodz frequented the movie houses 14 times during those ten months. 20 cinemas were active in 1946, 6.4 million tickets were sold and the average frequency of movie going was 12 times during 12 months. Some of the most frequented movie houses were Bałtyk, Włókniarz, Wisła, Polonia and Tęcza.¹⁰

Grynberg recalled a Jewish event:

instead of the usual Sunday morning concert by Jewish artists they were showing a rediscovered prewar Yiddish film – "dos shtetele Belz." [...] everybody wanted to get inside the hall, but there were only five hundred seats. They broke doors, windows and mirrors. The crowd pushed on all sides. Women shrieked. Some of them fainted and were carried out over the heads. The hall was full to the brim. Three and four people occupied each seat.¹¹

⁹ Information culled from Bulletins of Żydowska Agencja Prasowa, ul. Narutowicza 32, Łódź, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny.

¹⁰ *Biuletyn Wydziału Statystycznego Zarządu Miejskiego w Łodzi*, R. 1, nr 32, 23 IX 1948, p. 10. APL, Zarząd Miejski w Łodzi, Wydział Statystyczny; *Frekwencja w kinoteatrach łódzkich*, 1947 r., p. 8, APL.

Lidia Ofir-Schumacher, the daughter of the famous Yiddish comedian Israel Schumacher, a young girl at that time, and Natan Gross, then a young film director, recalled the first performances of Dzhigan and Schumacher in postwar Lodz. The two outstanding Jewish comedians, having just returned from the Soviet Gulag performed *Abi men zet zikh* (We Meet Again). The crowd was huge and very emotional. The audience and the actors stood and cried before the play started.¹²

My life centered in those years (1945–1950) around three foci: family, school and the Hashomer Hatsair youth movement. Our apartment was on Gdańska 33, the Ghetto Fighters Hebrew School – on Południowa 18 (the name of the Street has been changed later to Rewolucji 1905 r.) and Hashomer Hatsair – on Kilińskiego 49. This was then my most intimate Lodz space and “geography.” At times there were outings into surrounding woods, organized either by the school or by the youth movement. I went quite often with friends to the Zdrowie Resort or to the ZOO. I still have a photo in which I’m seated on the back of a huge elephant.

An official document deposited at the Archiwum Akt Nowych provides a short and somewhat dry description of my school at Południowa 18. This is a report following a visit (wizytacja) by a member of the Kuratorium of the Lodz School District conducted in January 1949.

The school was founded in 1945, without an official permit. Its principal, citizen Aron Raszal, reported that the school is run by the “Hechalutz-Pioneer” organization, with a Marxist orientation [...] The building could be fit for a school, though it has not been constructed for this purpose [...] The school is quite clean, the classrooms quite esthetical.

The school statistics were as follows (as of January 1949): total number of students – 153; total number of teachers – 12. Forty nine children attended 2 first grades; 27 – the second grade, 18 – the third, 19 – the fourth, 24 – the fifth, 7 – the sixth and 9 the seventh grade.¹³

For me and for my friends and schoolmates the school at Południowa 18 was a whole world in itself. Much more than just a school. In an interview with its first principal, Baruch Kaplinski, I was told that the name for the Hebrew school in Lodz, Bet Hasefer al shem Lohamei Hagetaot – im. Bojowników Getta – the Ghetto Fighters School, has been suggested by Antek Zuckerman. Besides a lengthy interview with Kaplinski I conducted interviews with several of the ex-students and intend to conduct additional interviews.

An episode from my Lodz years which has remained quite vivid and fascinating in my memory has been the filming of *Unzere Kindere* (Our Children) and my participation in it.

The famous Yiddish-Polish comedians Dzigán and Schumacher returned to Poland from the Soviet Union in 1947 and settled in Lodz. The Goskind brothers, Jewish film producers who spent the war years in Russia, rejoined the emerging postwar Polish film industry centered at that time in Lodz, and

¹² Lidia Ofir-Schumacher and Natan Gross on the Israeli TV series *Beerets ha-Yehudim* (In the Land of the Jews), 2003 and 2004.

¹³ AAN, Zespół Ministerstwa Oświaty, 472, 1949, pp. 1–7. I would like to thank Prof. Jerzy Tomaszewski for bringing this document to my attention.

formed the "Kinor" (Fiddle) film cooperative. They produced the first full length postwar Yiddish speaking film in Poland, *Unzere Kinder* (Our Children), directed by a young Jewish film director and Holocaust survivor, Natan Gross. Parts of the film were filmed at the Jewish Children's House in Helenówek. Dzigan and Schumacher played themselves, traveling comedians, who came to perform at the Helenówek Children's Home. They eavesdrop on some of the children telling their Wartime and Holocaust stories. I was one of those non-professional child actors.¹⁴

Although the tragedy and trauma of what happened during the War and the Holocaust had an impact in one way or another on the Jews who settled temporarily or permanently in postwar Lodz, memoirs and interviews indicate that there was, nevertheless, also a kind of "postwar euphoria", not only among Poles, but also among Jews, particularly the young ones.

August–September 2004 have been marked in Lodz by numerous impressive events representing and commemorating Jews and Jewish life in the city under German occupation. Besides the significance of this act for Jews in Lodz, in Poland, and abroad, it carries a special significance also for the living and documented history of contemporary Lodz. There is an ongoing process of "returning and reconstructing of the past" throughout eastern and central Europe, including Poland. Lodz has been rather late in this process. Joanna Szczesna, who lived with her family as a young girl in Baluty, wrote recently in an article about the Lodz Ghetto and Rumkowski: "I am familiar with nearly every stone in Rumkowski's Kingdom. Nobody ever inscribed even on one of them «Jews were born, lived and died here»".¹⁵

I consider my work on postwar Lodz as a modest contribution in this direction. I hope that my Lodz project will not only reconstruct those postwar years for myself and the prospective readers of my book, but also for contemporary and future residents of the city.

¹⁴ J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds*, Temple UP, Philadelphia 1995, pp. 330–331; N. Gross, *The Jewish Film in Poland after World War II* (Hebrew), Kolnoa 2 (1974), pp. 69–71; "Interview with Nathan Gross", *Giv'atayim*, February 2002.

¹⁵ J. Szczesna, "Skrzydła rozpostarli szeroko nad nami," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 27 VIII 2004.