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## Introduction

There is an imbalance in the way we remember the Jews of Europe. Thousands of books have been written about the Holocaust, but only a few have been written about the life of Polish Jews before they were murdered. The Holocaust was undoubtedly the greatest tragedy in Jewish history, but it would be a mistake to treat it as a heritage. Our heritage is the way the Jews of Europe lived and what they created before the Holocaust. In fact, they left us a rich legacy in religious and secular literature, in Hasidic and klezmer music, in Yiddish folk songs, and in art. An indication of the vitality and richness of Jewish life in pre-war Poland is the large number of newspapers and periodicals in Yiddish, Polish, and Hebrew that were published between the two wars. Despite poverty, that community produced more daily newspapers and periodicals than the larger and more affluent Jewish community of the United States. This cultural-religious heritage is awaiting redemption by the descendants of the murdered Jews of Europe. My memoirs, which describe the traditional life of my family and the community in which I grew up, are a small but significant segment of that heritage.

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To this day, when I think about my family I remember the Shabbats and festivals at home, the *zmirot* (hymns) we sang at the Shabbat meals that uplifted us and turned these meals into memorable religious feasts. These memories have made life worth living in spite of their tragic deaths. These memories have given me the courage to raise a family in a world that I had experienced as deranged by the blood and agonies of our people.

At first I was writing these memoirs for my daughters, Hanna and Merav. I wanted to acquaint them with the heritage in which I had grown up and with the lives of their paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, whom they had never met because they were murdered by the Nazis. Later it occurred to me that this story of traditional life in prewar Poland might be of interest to other people as well.

All but the last three chapters of this book describe various aspects of my life in prewar Poland. Chapter 17, "Escape to Freedom," describes how I escaped from a convoy on the way to Dachau when I had reached the point of exhaustion bordering on death. It was a desperate act guided by a powerful will to live that I ascribe to my mother's love and to my traditional upbringing's emphasis on life. In chapter 18, "The Encounter," I describe how meeting people who remained ultra-orthodox made me aware of how much I had changed. Finally, chapter 19, "After Liberation," describes how I reconstructed my life after six years in ghettos and concentration camps. I feel that these three segments complete my description of how my home and community equipped me to deal with life even in the worst of circumstances.

The first sixteen chapters cover the period between 1927, when I was four, and 1940, when the Germans put us in a ghetto. In my effort to be faithful to the realities I describe, I discovered the uncanny way one's memory works. Often, remembering vividly

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just one kernel of the story so that I could visualize it led to the recovery of the whole story.

I wrote these memoirs over a period of twenty years. In the spring of 1983 I had a half-year sabbatical from my position as director of Harvard Hillel, and Millie Guberman, who knew of my intention to write, provided me with sufficient funds to spend that time in Jerusalem. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for that generous assistance. When I returned, my job as director at Harvard Hillel again took up all of my time, and it was not until I retired in 1990 that I had time to resume writing. I was fortunate to have the longhand text of my memoirs written in Jerusalem, which served as the basis for this book.

Several people encouraged me and assisted in the writing of my memoirs. Foremost among them are my younger daughter, Merav, and my partner in life for the past twenty years, Nurit Lissovsky. Each read every part of the text and made sure that my story was coherent and readable. I also want to thank Deb Chasman, Illana Cohen, Emanuel Etkes, Irene Fairly, Richard Fine, and Ruth Anna Putnam, who read all or part of the book and made valuable suggestions.

## Jewish Radom

My family lived in Radom, a city in central Poland about sixty-five miles south of Warsaw. In 1939 a third of Radom's eighty-five thousand inhabitants were Jews, and less than a third of these were Orthodox. Most of them were Hasidim, followers of Hasidic rebbes. They worshipped in *shtibls* (Hasidic places of prayer), of which there were about twenty. We prayed at the *shtibl* of Piaseczno Hasidism, where my father had studied. No rabbi officiated at our prayers. They were led by members of the congregation, all of whom knew the prayers, and some of them even had pleasant voices.

Four Hasidic leaders lived in Radom. One of them, Reb Yosele, was our neighbor. I got to know him well, and I describe our relationship later in these memoirs; the other three I knew only from afar. Reb Yankele had a son who was a Communist. Religious people felt sorry for Reb Yankele and pronounced the word "Communist" in a hushed voice as if it meant a criminal. Indeed, Communists were treated as criminals in Catholic Poland. Another Hasidic leader, Reb Moishele, was known as the *veibersher rebbe* (the women's rebbe) because he gladly received women, listened to their troubles, and gave them his blessings.

There were many heders in Radom where children from religious homes were educated. Some were elementary, where they learned to read Hebrew, while at others, staffed by several teachers, children also studied Bible and Talmud. I spent a year in the elementary heder that was located one block away from home, and I continued in a graded heder until I was twelve.

Jews lived alongside Poles throughout Radom, but there was also a predominantly Jewish section, the Vuel (in Polish, Walo-va), with the town synagogue, the Beit HaMidrash (house of study), several shtibls, and the *mikvah*, the public bath that was used also by women for ritual immersion after menstruation.

The Vuel and its side streets were dotted with shops serving Jewish needs: kosher butcher shops, Jewish bakeries, stores with a large selection of religious books and articles, and shops that sold Jewish garments and hats. Before Passover my father would take me to the Vuel to buy me a new hat. I wore what was called a “Jewish hat,” which was black and looked like a baseball hat with a short cloth visor. The Vuel also had the largest and best Jewish delicatessen, which offered a variety of cold cuts, relishes, and beers. Yantche, its owner, presided over his establishment in a black yarmulka on his graying head and a white apron over his ample belly.

The Vuel also had one more attraction. My paternal cousins had a shop with a large selection of candies, nuts, raisins, and, of course, chocolates. The three Billander brothers were not married, and they apparently liked children. I would come away from their store laden with enough sweets to last me the whole week.

The Vuel was Jewish territory where I enjoyed feeling at home. I was fascinated by the vitality of the place, the variety of its shops, and the hustle and bustle of large numbers of Jews.

Once a week, on Friday afternoon, I would take a change of

underwear and a clean shirt and go to the mikvah. In our town the mikvah consisted of two large rooms. In the first room we undressed and washed the whole body with soap and water; then we would enter the second room, which had a large pool. In winter the pool was well heated. People entering it would sound a long “Ahhh” expressing both the heat and the pleasure. When they came out, their bodies were red and steaming. The mikvah was also a leveler: all of the people, whether ignorant or learned, rich or poor, were naked.

Our family lived on Zeromskiego Street, the main street of Radom, in a large apartment building with an inner courtyard. Both Jews and Poles lived in the building. Of the many Jews who lived there, only I and my friend Nahum Wolman wore traditional Jewish garments—the black capote and Jewish hat. No one troubled me about it, but I was aware of being different. I wore a “uniform,” and at times I was proud of it, at times self-conscious. Being “marked,” I avoided Polish neighborhoods because I was afraid of being attacked.

We shared our entry of the apartment building with five other families. Four of them were not religious. We met only on the stairway, and our contact with them was civil but not social. I not only remember them but have also dreamed about them. I was obviously curious about them. Our second-floor neighbor had a pretty daughter. She often sat on the balcony, and I would watch her from a distance. I didn’t know her name and had never spoken with her. That was my first interest in a girl, and I was about nine or ten. Our paths didn’t cross because I went to heder and then to a yeshiva, while she went to public school and then to the *gymnasium* (secular high school).

On Shabbat and holidays there was an important difference between the Vuel and the rest of the city, a difference that I would notice when I accompanied my father to services. Our path led

from the center of the city, where we lived, to the Vuel. In our neighborhood there was no difference between its appearance on Shabbat and weekdays. In fact, I noticed that even some Jewish stores were open for business on Shabbat. When we got to the Vuel, the hustle and bustle that marked that area on weekdays was gone. Stores were closed and people were walking to services leisurely, dressed in their Shabbat best. At midday, when people ate their Shabbat meal, the streets were empty. The Vuel celebrated Shabbat and holidays.

Jewish life in Radom was organized by the *kehillah*, the Jewish community organization. Its leadership was elected by the members of the Jewish political parties. At one extreme were representatives chosen by the Agudah and Mizrahi. Both parties were religious, but Mizrahi was also Zionist. At the other extreme were members of the Bund, a secular Socialist party. In between were Zionist parties of various shadings. Yonah Zilberberg, the last president of the *kehillah*, was our neighbor.

Although I was too young to follow the activities of the *kehillah*, I was aware of its seamier side. In 1938 two representatives of the *kehillah* attempted to persuade my father to run for the office of president. My father refused, and I heard him say, "I shall always work for Jews but never with Jews." I was puzzled by his uncharacteristically harsh statement. At the time I simply assumed that he was referring to the intrigues among the political parties that were represented in the leadership of the *kehillah*. After the war I read in the *Radom Memorial Book* an article that described the deplorable methods Rabbi Kestenberg used to hold onto his position after he had been appointed by the governor to serve temporarily as rabbi. He resorted to libel to frighten away every candidate who was elected by the community and relied on strong-arm tactics of his few supporters in the *kehillah*. In the

end he prevailed, but his was a Pyrrhic victory. Serious people like my father would have nothing to do with him.

Though the conflict over the rabbi and his reprehensible tactics cast a shadow over the kehillah, it didn't impair its functions. Most people continued to pay annual dues to the kehillah. These funds were used to pay the salaries of the rabbi and his assistants, the *shokhtim* (those who slaughtered animals), and other employees of the kehillah. These funds also financed the institutions that were sponsored by the kehillah: the Jewish hospital, the home for the aged, the home for orphans, the Talmud Torahs for children from poor homes, the shelter where itinerant beggars spent the night, and many other beneficial institutions and functions. Despite the problems that plagued the kehillah periodically, I wonder whether Jewish life in the United States wouldn't have been better off with a democratically organized kehillah instead of the philanthropies with a leadership that no one elected.