

## ID Project Interview

Interview with Mr. Jack Polak  
March 2, 1992  
Concerning His Relatives

- Q: We are speaking with Mr. Jack Polak about his father, Fredrik Polak. The date is March 2, 1992.  
Mr. Polak, what could you tell us about your father? Can you tell us first his date of birth and place of birth?
- A: He was born in Amsterdam in August 1883. He was part of a very religious family, was the smartest of five children. One died very early. He had three sisters and one brother. So, there were six children, one must have died early, and the other four, he had one blind brother and three sisters, all married. Two sisters without children, one sister without children. None came back. My father worked himself to become an accountant. He was a very respected member of the Jewish community, as well as of the general community he was a learned man. He was a fantastic friend for children. I do recall distinctively that in summer vacations when we went to the seashore in Holland, all the children of all nephews and even many friends always came to him telling stories and even today I have certain stories and certain songs my father was singing at those seashores which my grandchildren now treasure because they know it comes from their grandfather who they never knew. He worked himself as an accountant very hard, however never knew how to make money on it because he became an accountant of many charitable organizations and on which he always charged the minimum. As such his entire life he went through week by week also many members of his family depended on him. He had to pay for his blind brother, he had to support his sisters many times, and as such we know he had always a hard time. Still, he was always happy and my father and mother had a very happy marriage and he was also able to bring the joy of being part of the orthodox family to us. The Friday nights were wonderful testimony of how an orthodox family should live a Shabbat.
- Q: Do you know about how he met your mother and when, and when they got married?
- A: I don't know much about it. All I know is it was a very close relationship in all the sisters of my mother. I will talk to you about my mother in a few minutes. My mother came from a well-known family in Holland and every Thursday night all brothers and sisters of that family came together at one of the homes of one of the sisters of the family of my mother. And these wonderful, joyful occasions for all of them to come together. Almost none of them came back.
- Q: So your parents met then and married probably in the early turn of the century.
- A: They must have married, because I was born in 1912. There was one son born to them who died very young, at one or two years old. So I would say that they must have gotten married maybe in 1907 or 1908. That is what I suspect. They lived in Amsterdam. My mother was a teacher. She was a teacher in shorthand and she was a teacher in (asked his wife) how do you call that? Wife: Sewing, but its not sewing clothes, it's like embroidery and fancy stitches. I don't know how you call it.

Q: Crafts?

A: Something, anyway she was teaching in the Jewish elementary school. I know there was once a problem because, although they were orthodox, she never wear a wig and they wanted her to wear a wig. There was a big commotion in the Jewish community because how can a Jewish teacher in a Jewish community teach. But she got a certificate from the doctor that it would endanger her health to wear it and she got away with it. I remember there was a big discussion about it at that time. She was a very respected teacher in every way. Not only that she later became part of the federal examination procedures in which she was part, really, of federal (wife: What they did is when you did your final exams from high school which were really exams, not just a test, official, the government would send a delegate to sit in on the orals. First the written on all subjects and then the oral. And they would send always one person to sit there so the schoolteacher would ask the question and not add something, it was honor.) We lived in the first years of my life on the second floor of a house which was very cramped quarters. Certainly not rich living, to the contrary, it was very poor living. I recall my own Bar Mitzvah reception was done at our home and people had to crawl on steps which were very narrow. Even Bar Mitzvah parties were not comparable, still I remember my Bar Mitzvah having a dinner Friday night, which was a fantastic dinner, at our home pre-prepared themselves and the reception all prepared only at our own home. All our lives we were just making it. During the summer my parents always took in paying guests. That way they were able to give us a summer vacation on the seashore. We always had paying guests. In fact, one of the young paying guests we had is now living in Scarsdale. I always remember that little boy who came to us because his parents, at that time, paid us for him to stay with us at that time.

Q: So, it seems your family life was very happy?

A: Very happy.

Q: Can you tell us what you know about what happened to your mother during the war?

A: My father and mother, I would say after I joined the \_\_\_\_\_ practice, maybe I'm more materialistic than my mother and father, I really showed him that he should charge more and somewhere they got a much nicer living after I joined them. We were able to make some money and save a little bit money and they were able to move to better quarters, and I would say the last years of their life was much happier. Of course, they had their daughters. They had my older sister who was married to a very successful businessman and a nice man, although he may have been a womanizer, he was a very nice man. I was very proud of the family. My younger sister, who married that young columnist, was the darling of my father and they always compare my daughter and me with my sister and my father. I think I am treating my daughter the same way as my father treated his favorite, my sister Betty, and even today I have to talk to my youngest sister always, that Betty was always the love of her father. She knows that and she knew how to handle him too. Betty had a very interesting life and she was a wonderful woman. Even my first wife, like I say, was crazy about my father. My father was a fantastic man. Even today when I talk to people, anybody I talk who knew my father always talks about him that he was such an unusual man. So, as such, I have the greatest memory. So we had a happy life and when the war started, yes, he saw they had no choice, they may have had a chance to go into hiding but it never dawned on them. It never dawned on all of us really how serious it was and what was going to happen to all of us. For the last year of his life he was able, because of his

importance in the Jewish community, to stay longer than many other people. The deporting started in July 1942, he was taken away in June 1943, as such he was a little bit longer than the normal. He was taken last of all for another four weeks, but even then he was not important enough to be saved. So he was taken away on July 23, 1943.

Q: Both of your parents?

A: Both, they were taken away. They went in a very prestigious train, there were several rabbis in that. I don't know if you saw the movie. "Escape from Sobibor." And you may recall how all these well-dressed people arrived in Sobibor. So my father and mother, the way they were dressed in their best clothes, arriving in Sobibor. And that was it. They died two days. Everybody who, I think the number is that 40,000 people went to Sobibor and I think about 100.

Q: Fewer than 300 survived. Fifty people survived the uprising.

A: You got the number from Engle, because he was one of the few survivors.

Q: Is there something about your mother's personality that you could recall?

A: My mother's personality was also very outgoing, very friendly. A real mother. I don't recall any fights my parents ever had. They were just a wonderful congenial family. My mother came from a quite a big family. Eight or nine brothers and sisters. Her father had died at a very early age. He was in the diamond industry, and my grandmother lived for a long time died, I think in 1936 or 37. I knew my grandmother. My mother came from a very close-knit family. All the sisters came together almost, like I said, every Thursday night and from that family only three survived in hiding. A niece, interesting enough, other people were not orthodox people. From that family, the three people were not orthodox at all. One went with the Palestine transport to Palestine and they lost their only son and one other sister who went into hiding lost their only son and one sister and brother-in-law survived in hiding with their two children who are now living in Australia and the United States. She worked very hard. She made sure that we got a good upbringing, but in the meantime they were both working, they had to make a living and still I never had any idea of poverty. I knew there was no money, but I still never had no idea that we were poor at all. Although we were poor. As such we had a wonderful life.

Q: Is there anything else about either of your parents that you can include? Do you know what they did in Westerbork? They were in Westerbork for a short time?

A: They were in Westerbork from June 43 to July 43, only four weeks.

Q: You weren't even there yet?

A: No, I came, I was there for one week with them, so I saw them really for one week.

Q: So that was the last time you saw them?

A: That was the last time I saw them. Just for one week. At that time already my young sister was with me. She was in Westerbork and my other sister, two sisters were in Westerbork with me at that time.

Q: The families were allowed to meet and talk?

A: In Westerbork you had close contact really. It was permitted. You could talk to anybody. In Bergen Belsen, it was much more difficult. There was work. When I worked in the kitchen from three o'clock in the morning, I didn't see anybody, only certain people in the kitchen. That's why I left little notes for my wife, just to say what I am doing and what is happening.

Q: Well, I think that can conclude our discussion about your parents. Thank you very much.

### **Sister Julia Bola**

Q: We are speaking to Mr. Polak about his sister, Julia Bola. Mr. Polak what can you tell us about Julia? When was she born, where was she born, what was she like as a child?

A: My sister Julia was a. I would say, a woman with problems. I hate to say that. Basically she always had emotional problems from early date on. She was in a way, she was beautiful. She was smart as all our kids and sometimes being smart doesn't make it easiest in life, and she suffered. I think somewhere by the fact that my father favored my younger sister at a later date. She was crazy about a young man who she met in the Zionist Movement, and they were engaged and they got married, and they shouldn't have gotten married because he was as nice and smart a man as he was, he was certainly not the right man for her and she never recognized that. They fortunately I would say, had no children. They were on the forefront of the Zionist Movement in Holland. Both he and she were good speakers. They taught Hebrew. Her Hebrew was much better than mine. They were planning to go to Palestine. I don't recall exactly how and where, but there is a book just out now about all the people who were in the Hav Shara movement in Holland and her name is mentioned in that book, which made me sure that she was really in the Hav Shara Movement before the war. She got married, I think, in 1938, and stayed in Amsterdam until July '43. They were sent in the same transport as I to Westerbork. They also were put on the Palestine list. With the Palestine list they came to Bergen Belsen. Of course being young they were not allowed to go with the Palestine transport.

Q: What year was that?

A: That was in July 1944. She has a terrible time in Bergen Belsen. She deteriorated fast, she looked terrible when I last saw her, which was, as I recall, only the beginning of April 1945 in Bergen Belsen. We didn't see each other too much because I worked in the kitchen. I do not know anything more than that they both went with the same train in those cattle cars in April 11, 1945 leaving Bergen Belsen and going to Germany. She was liberated together with me in Trovitz, near Leipzig and must have died two days after liberation. I learned that only, I would say, one week after I came out of a coma, they didn't tell me right away, and in fact I do recall that about one week after I came out of the coma they told me that Roosevelt had died and that my sister had died.

Q Can we go back maybe to, do you know, did she have any interests as a child? Did she play any instruments? Did you have any pets in the family?

A: We never had. Yes, we must have had cats somewhere. I remember something about cats. But, basically we were never pet lovers, so I don't recall at all that we had pets. We all played an instrument. One of the things I do recall is notwithstanding the fact that we were poor, my

parents always teach us piano or violin, whatever it was. I had two years of piano lessons which was a complete waste. But, I do recall because somebody in a good family had to learn some instrument. I don't remember what my sisters learned, but I'm sure they did too.

Q: Was she friendly, did she have a lot of friends?

A: She was friendly, she had a lot of friends. Her friends circled around the same friends we had. Mostly of the Zionist groups. I really was more personally I was more geared to the non-Jewish friends I could get. Maybe at that time already I felt more I was a member of the basketball club, which had about twenty percent Jews. Or eighty percent non-Jews then. Not that it was ever mentioned to us or stated that it was twenty and eighty percent. Now I recall at a later date really, you know, I don't think she went out to the non-Jewish world as much as I did. Of course having worked at the Carlton Hotel in Amsterdam, it made me also better understand the importance of the non-Jewish world to the Jewish people. But she circled really around the life of completely Zionist life. That was ninety percent of her life.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to mention about Julia?

A: No. The only thing I can say is that I do recall that in March 1945, she was very hungry and I had a little piece of bread and she asked me for that piece of bread. I never gave it to her. Now, if the psychiatrist would examine me he would say you have tremendous guilt thinking about it, and would have the rest of your life. I must say in all honesty I felt at that moment that piece of bread could save my life and I didn't give it to my sister. But I still think about it. It wouldn't have saved her life anyway, but things like that, you know, stay for a long time. That was about the last time I saw her. One of the horrors of life.

Q: Thank you very much for your time.