

Leon Kowner

We were comfortable. We didn't own any property; we did not live in our own apartment. We rented an apartment in a good neighborhood in town. I attended a private school, maybe special in Lodz. There were very few students; it was called "Nasza Szkola" (Our School). This school grew together with their students. There was always one grade above ours, they always added one grade.

In 1939, when I finished elementary school, our school was supposed to start a Gymnasium. It was on Narutowicza Street. All the teachers, except the caretaker, were Jewish. The students too, even though a few described themselves as "no religion."...Of course the language of the school was Polish and the spirit was a patriotic spirit of Poland.... I grew up in a Polish patriotic atmosphere at home because my father was an officer in the Polish Army.

We had social ties with the veterans, and among them were Germans, Poles. ...Later we found out that some of them were already members of the Nazi party at the beginning of the war, when the Germans entered Lodz, than after a few days they appeared in our apartment with the symbol, symbol of the party NSDAP.....but there were friends who tried to help and even one of them -Shpreig (sp?), I remember his name, he used to enter the ghetto. This was a period when the Jews were not allowed to leave the ghetto, but the non-Jews were allowed to enter. He visited and warned my father "get out; don't stay there, only no good expects you there." Anyway, I am talking about 1939 or early 1940, we received signs that we shouldn't stay. When we were already in the ghetto, my Dad was very sorry that he didn't transfer my sister. Before the war my father had a deputy, a woman who was born in Germany and married a Pole.....we were very sorry she was not on the Aryan side. It wasn't done in Lodz.

I saw the first units enter town, they were magnificent....goggles, hats, the color, not khaki, later I found out that it was called "feld-grau."

...the Germans started to catch Jews in the streets [for forced labor]. They knew who was a Jew in the Jewish- religious neighborhood....but when a Jew was dressed like them, they could not distinguish [who is a Jew]. Even me, who was 12-years old, they caught one day.

...we were so naïve. The restrictive laws started with a ban against Jews walking on a sidewalk on Piotrkowska Street [main street], only on the road. It was forbidden to travel on a streetcar in the front wagon. Really, there were announcements in German and Polish that forbade this. Jews could travel in a second car. It was before the Jews were marked. Later they established a first marking by an armband to wear on left arm. If I am not mistaken it was white and blue and later, much later, at the end of 1939 we were ordered to wear a badge, front and back, we had to have a yellow star.

My father found a house, which belonged to a railway worker. It was a small house, even the toilet was outside. But the good thing was that it had a garden with very elegant

flowers. He transferred the house to my father, we took a room with the kitchen. There were two other rooms. Two additional families lived there. We were responsible for the garden. He made us promise that we will take care of the dahlias. ...they shook hands and went each his way. Good, the dahlias were eaten during the big hunger, in the winter 40/41.

...[gymnasium for Jews before formation of the ghetto] the classrooms were terrible, there were 50 to 60 children in each.

History, there were no problems there, because we studied the classical period – ancient Greece and Rome.

What I am saying is that the first winter in the ghetto [40/41] we ate this [flowers] I suffered because of hunger. Hunger caused psychosis of some kind.

Mother divided [rozdzielala] the bread to all of us. Each one of us knew that this is the portion of bread. As a kid I saw injustice in her division, that my sister who was 4 years old received the same portion as me, 13 years old.

You are asking me a question which causes me to feel guilty, because my sister when they killed her in Auschwitz in 44, she was 9 years old and she was illiterate. She didn't know to read and write. It wouldn't be such a big problem if I or my mother or my father would sit with her and teach her. We didn't do it....she was a girl, typical war child. ...after the Szpera she was very lonely. ... actually I can't imagine what her world was like, so I am answering you with very loud silence.

...I was always an avid reader and each time I discovered...in the beginning it was Scandinavian literature that I dove into. Later I read Russian literature, I threw myself into Dostoyevsky, I slept with "Brothers Karamazov." ...later, under the influence of Mela I discovered Jack London – I read him but I didn't take him seriously, but after I read Martin Eden, suddenly I realized that it was work of great importance.

...there was a custom in the ghetto that if you visited someone and he said "eat something" than you always said "no."

...I think that uncle Josef [Kowner] helped...to transfer me to Wisenspiele Abtailung...we made Jewish figurines and arranged scenes from Jewish life in show cases...we made Jewish dolls from these figures we built a wedding scene...Passover scene all kinds of scenes from Jewish life.

...at the end they closed this...I worked there for six months, nine months. There I met Mela Folgelbaum that later she became one of the people that greatly influenced my life...small woman with a profile like a bird, like eagle. She was much older than me. She was 32 years old – that's all, I was 17...our relationship was exclusively intellectual and friendly...we talked a lot.

Mela was talented in many ways. She was a poetess, but she drew and sculpted too. She wrote prose, not only poems. Mela opened for me horizons of modern art...that there is poetry different from what I knew. Because of her I started to read poetry of Rimbaud (sp?) or Vereïn (sp?), Mayakovsky and others. I started to live more like a bohemian. I started to visit Mela at home [after closing of the “museum” workshop], she lived at the other end of the ghetto, on Marynarska Street. She lived in the smallest of apartments. Later I found out that she lived with her mother, but she died earlier. On the walls there were lots of expressionistic pictures, she wrote poetry and she recited poetry. We were a small group of admirers, and among them the main two admirers, she called us “the faithful.” It was me and Hela, Hela Zymler. I didn’t know then, I mean we knew that she was sick and we knew that her health worsened, but what was the nature of the illness, we didn’t know. Now I know that it was tuberculosis. She was a prime example of a person who lives only in spirit, she ate almost nothing. Hela helped her more, she cooked soups for her. At first she would go out with her painter’s stand and she painted...later she just laid in bed...she was in bed all the time. We, the “faithful” would empty her bedpan. Mela was one big drama. She dreamt of a wide world, of southern islands and a maid whose name was “Waikiki.” Mela...they took Mela laying down, she was unable to walk... She influenced me a great deal, I started to paint at that time and she declared that I am talented. I never knew that I had a talent, later I agreed. I started to write poetry, I started to be alive, lived the art. All this distanced me from the reality of the ghetto...I had song, which I sang to myself: “tomorrow... tomorrow I will get out and paint” ...no, no...it was Hela that donated her soup...I helped out, I did things around the house...For some reason she wasn’t able to eat, she always left her portion of bread untouched and she always offered to others, but no one wanted to eat it...she really lived on air and feelings...

Regardless of the time of the year, the bread portion remained the same, it was 250 gram a day [half a pound]...when you eat good things – it is a lot of bread. But when this is your almost only food, it is very little.

...Nina remained without a father and without his protection. She was hidden behind me, so she wasn’t noticed. Most children were hidden in apartments and they were found there, these Germans, these SS-men that searched, looked for those who were not too old, they left them alone. My mother and me, we stood there and Nina stood behind me and she trembled. I am talking now about Szpera. She trembled and I petted her, she was a small girl after all.

The whole family of my mother was taken. Whole families...first of all they took my uncle Garfinkel, Feliks Garfinkel and my aunt Merka, that we lived with them on Rybna Street, they disappeared in the Szpera...my aunt, the whole Adler family, I mean aunt, uncle and their daughter Pola, taken in the Szpera. This was my mother’s sister, her brother Levi, David Levi with his two daughters and his wife, taken in the Szpera. Another uncle, mother’s brother, Wolf Levi with three sons and his wife, taken in the Szpera...

With all my relationships I spent little time at home, I was so much with Mela and Sonia [girlfriend] and I neglected the home. The relationships at home became complicated, there was a certain tension between me and my parents. I said to myself: "I want to leave the ghetto." How to do it? I will volunteer for labor. I notified my father that I am going to do it. Father didn't answer me. He said: "If you want you can do it, you are a free man, you are an adult."

After a few days he told me, and this was the first time ever that he spoke to me this way. "You are my firstborn son, it will be very difficult to lose you, I will suffer a lot if you will not be here." I said to him: "why are you saying that?" He answered: "I want you to know that all these that are leaving now, are going to destruction. They kill them." "How do they kill them?" "Gas, things like that, I do not remember, but anyway he said that they are destroyed and he said: "this will be...I will not be able to take it....not only that I will suffer that I do not have a son anymore, but the fact that I didn't stop you. You have to promise me that you give up this plan." And I promised him.