

Anna Mass With Friends



It's me and my school friends, in Lublin. I don't remember their names...

I completed an elementary school. My sister, who was two years older than me, went to a Jewish school in the Jewish quarter. An ordinary school, elementary, it was called at the time. It was at Lubartowska, far from home. Because my father was a Bundist and above all he was a Jew. We were never ashamed of being Jews. Even today, when I strike up a friendship with someone, I tell them right away, so that there's no embarrassment when they say something about Jews, and here I am, a Jew. So my father believed we should go to a Jewish school. We spent in that school two years.

And then a decision was made that we should change the school because there was a Polish one right near our house, at Bernardynska, we wouldn't have to walk to the other side of town. So we transferred to a Polish elementary school no. 9. My sister was taken back a year because her Polish was poor. And I was admitted to first grade. In that school, I was a particularly shy kid. Quiet, calm. I went to the teacher and told her I didn't want to be in first grade, because I was bored. That I could read and write, and count, so that perhaps I could be moved to second, to be together with my sister. Later I regretted it a bit when I saw how the first graders played, and there was none of that in the second.

I was a very good student throughout school, straight As. I loved math, physics, chemistry. All science subjects, but my smooth talk shows I wasn't bad at Polish literature either. My essays were always ten pages long, the teacher always said, 'Write shorter ones!' Because how long would it take her to read them if all were that long? We had our own religion teacher. The other girls had a priest, whom they loved very much and whom we loved as well. A really good man. But we had our own [Jewish] religion teacher. I had a grievance against her once, very serious. It was Easter and I came to school with kosher matzah with scrambled eggs. It happened so that I swapped that

matzah with a friend of mine for a butter-and-ham sandwich. And that friend then told on me to the religion teacher. The religion teacher put me to kneel in the corner. She explained to me later that I had committed a sin, more than a double one: not only did I eat ham; it was also with butter and bread, all of which is forbidden on a high holiday. A triple sin with a single sandwich! Isn't this horrible?

For thirty students in my class, there were seven Jews, and the history teacher never called us 'Jews' but always 'Israelites.' Every time she said that, I felt like someone slapped me in the face. Why Israelites? Why not Jews? I assumed she was a Jew-hater. Today I think I was wrong, she simply tried not to hurt our feelings. But I couldn't study history. When I studied it, it went in this way and out that way, leaving little in the head. And she kept asking me, 'Szwarcowna, you're good at all other subjects, why aren't you good at history?' What was I supposed to say? 'Because I don't like you, madam'? For the final report card, however, in order not to spoil it, she gave me a B instead of a C. I had all As and that single B. That I will never forget her, in the good sense, that she didn't want to hurt me.

And then it began. My tutor called my parents and told them, 'Because your daughter has been such a good student, she should go to gymnasium.' The tuition fee was forty zlotys a month. An unimaginable sum. I knew I wasn't good for giving private lessons, because it annoyed me that my pupil didn't know what I knew. I knew that if I proved a good student, they'd reduce the fee after several months to just ten zlotys a month. But that was still a lot of money. So I sat down with my parents, like a grown-up with grown-ups, talked to them. I told them I knew there was no money at home. If I went to work, I'd start earning. Otherwise, I'd be studying for four more years and there'd be even less money. And it was me who convinced my parents rather than the other way round. And I went to work.

Though a friend of my mother's believed I'd make a great dressmaker, judging by the dresses I made for my dolls, I said had no patience for that, and that I'd go mad before I made a dress. I better make hats, I said. And I went to make hats to a milliner. But because I was 13 and the age requirement for an official contract was 15, I didn't make any money until I turned 15. Except as tip from time to time for delivering a client's hat to her home. My boss was such a person that she kept me in the shop until midnight. And there was still of a way to walk home. I worked near where we lived, one bus stop, let's say, but who used buses before the war. You always walked on foot. Twenty groszy the single fare was a lot of money. Until one day my mother went to ask her, that I'm only 13, to let me go home earlier, and on that same day she kept me until after midnight, and she asks me whether I'm the only child that my mother is so protective towards me. She herself had just one son and was really overprotective towards him. But I didn't matter. I don't know her name. I've never had a good memory for names, not that I've forgotten because of old age