

Wilhelm Kleinberg



This is Wilhelm Kleinberg, my darling grandfather. The photo must have been taken in Cracow in the 1930s.

My mother's father came from Drogobych, where he was born in about 1867. In his daily affairs he used the Germanized version of his first name, though on his birth certificate he was 'Wolf'. He was my darling Granddad, and altogether a marvelous man. Granddad, like the majority of small-town, provincial Jews, set huge store by education. Unfortunately he hadn't been able to get an education; he had to do physical work, but I don't know what kind of work. But he was a devilishly talented self-starter and spoke a delightful, beautiful Polish, although in practice he didn't have his school-leaving certificate.

As a very young man he went into service with Count Borkowski, and later became his secretary. Those were the most sublime years of his life in his reminiscences, because first of all as a secretary, he learned calligraphy. And secondly, Count Borkowski took him on his travels to the Middle East, more or less following Slowacki's route. Granddad returned from those travels absolutely enchanted.

Once, as a young boy, I got a slap around the chops from my granddad, something that happened only once in my life. What happened was, as a little kid I was ferreting around in the wardrobes in my grandparents' apartment and I found something astonishing. This piece of headgear in the shape of a flowerpot, with a tassel. It was a fez, which Granddad had brought back as a souvenir from his journey of a lifetime. I was chasing around the apartment in this fez when Granddad came in, was absolutely furious, slapped me round the face and didn't even attempt to explain what for.

After Granddad stopped working for Count Borkowski, he settled down in Cracow. There, he married a woman born and bred in Cracow - Antonina, nee Kirschner. Children came along, there was a family to be kept, and so Granddad learned a new trade - photography. And then, in this wooden hut on Swietej Gertrudy Street, just below Wawel, he opened a photography firm, where he specialized in photographing kids. At first the firm was called 'Zofia,' like Granddad's eldest daughter, and later 'Kamera.' I know that Granddad won commemorative medals and prizes for his photographs at exhibitions in Belgium and Paris. It was in the 1920s. He didn't go to those exhibitions himself, of course, but someone or other sent the photographs off. That was before World War I.

Granddad had this mentor for his photography, Mr. Szczepanik. He was a Pole, later known as the Polish Edison, because he really did invent all these different optical and photographic instruments; after the war someone even wrote a pamphlet about him. Thanks to Szczepanik, Granddad became a protégé of Wyspianski. And that was how Granddad came to take the first photographs of the world premiere of 'Wesele' at the Slowacki Theater in Cracow, and of the world premiere of Rydel's 'Zaczarowane kolo'. Wyspianski was ill by then, and had turned eccentric, but he rewarded Granddad and had him do some more photography jobs.