

TEOFILA SILBERRING: So that memory doesn't die

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| <p>When many people think of the term “Polish Jews,” or Jews from Cracow or even Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter, they think of orthodox, religious Jews—who I greatly respect.</p> | |
| <p>But that wasn't everyone in Cracow—or even Kazimierz, where we lived. Even my grandparents spoke Polish—not Yiddish.</p> | |
| <p>My parents both came from just across the river in Podgorze-- This is the only picture of my father, Juda Nussbaum. His family lived at 8 Dlugosza Street.</p> |  |
| <p>My mom, Gustawa Barber, lived in 32 Kalwaryska Street—right around the corner from my dad. And this is the only picture I have of her.</p> |  |
| <p>My dad's family had a house on Miodowa Street in Kazimierz. That's where my parents moved as newlyweds.</p> <p>There were shops on the ground floor, apartments to rent on the first floor, and my parents moved into an apartment with eight rooms above. That's where my brother Henryk was born in 1921, and I was born in 1925.</p> |  |
| <p>I have two pictures of Henryk. Here he is in his uniform from Dr Hilfstein's Hebrew school.</p> <p>I grew up in Henryk's shadow. He was incredibly gifted, especially in physics and math.</p> |  |
| <p>As for religion—we were considered reform and right across from us was the great Temple Synagogue. Mom and Dad would go on Saturdays sometimes, and certainly for all the major holidays.</p> | |
| <p>On Friday evenings, Mom lit candles for Shabbat.</p> | |
| <p>I went to a state elementary school on Starowislna Street, on the corner of Miodowa Street. There were very few Jewish children there, but everyone got along just fine.</p> | |
| <p>On Sundays, I went with my maid to her church Bozego Ciala Street.</p> | |
| <p>When I was in the fifth grade Dad sent me to Henryk's school-- Dr. Hilfstein Hebrew Gymnasium. Our instructors taught in Polish and in Hebrew. There were only Jewish children in our school, and very well-off ones.</p> | |

Some children came by car, others were brought to school by their nannies or servants white gloves. They even carried their school books!

And there I was, living the life of wealth and privilege. What could be better than this?

In [September 1939 the Germans invaded Poland](#) and the Second World War began. [The Russians came in from the east a few weeks later.](#)

Krakow was under German occupation. [In December we were forced to wear armbands so we could be identified as Jews.](#) If you took it off, they would simply kill you on the spot.

It was no better for non-Jews in Poland. [The Germans were horrible to the Poles as well.](#)

One day I was returning from school—and there in front of our house was our janitor, looking awful. She said, “*Toska, you don’t have a mother anymore.*”

I stood there in horror. “What do you mean?” I asked her. She told me that German soldiers came and took away the furniture. Mother tried to stop them and one of the soldiers just pulled out his gun and killed her.

When dad came home he called some friends. Two of them then walked through our apartment destroying everything they could with axes. Everything.

I knew that my life had changed forever.

It was too dangerous on our street, which was all Jewish. So my mom’s sister took us in. Aunt Hela lived in a mixed neighborhood—Jews and non-Jews. I remember her cook Anna made blueberry pierogies to cheer me up.



We were there until we were forced into the [Podgorze ghetto](#) in March 1941. We lived in a tiny room with other families.

[Then Dad, Henryk and I had to go to work.](#) We barely saw each other. Of course, we weren’t paid.

I was always hungry but sometimes Anna, Aunt Hela’s maid, stood at the gates of the ghetto. When I would go by, she said, “You’re so hungry, Toska, I brought you a little something.” And she handed me blueberry perogies.

Then, after two years of this hell, in March 1943, the Germans liquidated the ghetto.

We were ordered to a square in front of the pharmacy, which is now a museum because the [pharmacist](#) helped Jews.

We were taken to the [concentration camp Plaszow.](#)

Just before we were separated, Dad said, “When this is over, we meet in front of our house on Miodowa Street.”

Dad handed me a big sack full of books. “Never stop learning, Toska.”

I wasn’t in Plaszow for long, because I was taken to work in an [enameling factory](#) in the district of Zablocie, at nr.4 Lipowa Street.

A big German man came up to me. He stroked my hair and smiled.

His name was [Oskar Schindler.](#)

There are [many stories](#) about Oskar Schindler. I can tell you this—he helped us.

We knew we were safer with Oskar Schindler than anywhere else.

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| <p>There were Jews and Poles in his factory, and he made sure we got food to eat, and the Polish women we worked with smuggled letters in and out for us. If you had anything to sell, you would give it to one of the Polish women, who would go out and sell it for you, and then bring you back food or cash.</p> | |
| <p>The kindest person was Zofia Godlewska. She was horribly poor, but treated me best of all. The janitor was always kind—he slipped me some small roll from time to time.</p> | |
| <p>I worked for Schindler until Plaszow was liquidated in October 1944. Schindler had arranged for all his workers to be taken to Brunnlitz, in Bohemia.</p> | |
| <p>But 300 women were sent instead to Auschwitz. I was among them. We waited for days—Schindler had sent word that we would not be taken in, that he was on the way. And suddenly Schindler was there with a list, and they called out for us. But when I came up to the train and gave my name, I was pushed back. Someone else had taken my place.</p> | |
| <p>“Herr Direktor, what about me?” I asked. “You’re on the list,” he called, but the train was moving. A guard turned on me with his whip and he beat me and beat me.</p> | |
| <p>I remained in Auschwitz.</p> | |
| <p>The Soviets liberated Ravensbrück at the end of April 1945. We were sick, but I jumped on any truck or any train heading home.</p> | |
| <p>Then I got there. No father, no Henryk. And some family was living in our apartment. Right there on Miodowa Street I just stood there sobbing.</p> | |
| <p>I wanted to go back to the camp. At least, there had been that bunk and I’d been someone’s business.</p> | |
| <p>With nowhere to go, no place to live, I stumbled into 38 Długa Street, where a Jewish Committee had been set up. People put up slips of paper looking for lost family members. I put up my name up, too.</p> | |
| <p>I on straw in the courtyard and slept on straw with other lost souls.</p> | |
| <p>The people were terribly poor after the war but I still found help.</p> | |
| <p>At university, I met a very nice young Jewish man from Bochnia—Adam Silberring.</p> | |
| <p>That’s Adam with his family as a boy.</p> |  |
| <p>And here he is in his family’s car.</p> |  |
| <p>Adam and his family had fled into the Soviet Union when the war began.</p> | |

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| <p>We married on the 2nd of October 1947. Here we are on our honeymoon, in the Tatra mountains.</p> |  |
| <p>Adam worked as a chemical engineer, but in 1968, he was forced to quit his job during the anti-Semitic campaign instigated by the Communists in Poland. But Adam was too good of a chemist to ignore. He found work immediately and worked into old age.</p> | |
| <p>Adam and I had a large circle of friends. There were bridge games and lectures, concerts and vacations.</p> <p>I was happy - I wanted to be happy. I had seen enough of the sad times.</p> | |
| <p>Our son, Jerzy was born on 30 May 1949 in Cracow.</p> <p>Like my father, Jerzy embraced languages. Like my brother, he embraced chemistry.</p> <p>Jerzy studied chemistry and physics at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow.</p> |  |
| <p>He completed his studies, received his Ph.D. and in 2001 he became a professor.</p> |  |
| <p>Around 1994, I started talking about what had happened to me during the war. That's because the film about Oskar Schindler came out and was a big success.</p> <p>I decided to tell my story – so that memory doesn't die.</p> | |
| <p>Today I have trouble walking, but still I go out to enjoy this beautiful city of mine.</p> | |
| <p>Sometimes a friend tries to lead me into Kazimierz, past Miodowa Street and my house.</p> <p>I think—someday I'll be able to go by there, but not yet, I say. Not yet...</p> |  |