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The Magic School

Although there was no reason to be high spirited in the summer of 1939,

I was then a happy thirteen years old girl looking forward to September. That's when I would attend my first classes at the Gymnasium and Lyceum for Girls in Lodz. At the time, I heard but did not listen to Hitler's thundering voice resonating on all radio stations, warning and threatening Poland that Gdansk is *uhr- Deutch* and must be returned to the *Vaterland*. I looked at but didn't see Hitler's face, distorted by hatred; instead, I viewed him as a comic figure. Detached from reality, basking in the glory of passing the gymnasium's entrance exams, I continued my carefree life. However, that was about to change and change quickly.

On September 8, 1939, the streets of Lodz seemed to bend under the heavy load of Nazi tanks entering the city. Almost immediately, the invaders started staging bloody spectacles on the streets – torturing, degrading and killing Jews. The German's sadism and cruelty matched Nazi doctrine, but what should we think of observers who enjoyed the scenes? They were our neighbors, our co-workers, our fellow-countrymen.

To my surprise all schools in Lodz reopened their doors at the end of September and I started classes in my "dream" gymnasium meeting new classmates and teachers in an atmosphere of grave uncertainty. Two months later Nazis applied racial segregation that restricted Jewish students to Jewish schools. Soon new

orders followed and all Jewish gymnasia were reduced to one. The mammoth high school with its 5000 students received its final location in the newly forming ghetto in the spring of 1940. Mrs. Stella Rein, a well known and respected personality in Lodz, the former Director of Ab's Gymnasium and Lyceum for Girls, obtained the same position in the ghetto school.

In the hermetically sealed ghetto, which took place on May 1, 1940, the school functioned well, but the lives of students and teachers were already dysfunctional because of deportations, mass execution, jail like conditions and hunger. My father, who was jobless, lived in fear of deportation; my mother, a nurse, worked abnormally long hours in the hospital. She was practically absent at home. And my grandmother vegetated in a restless state of dementia. The small room where we lived exacerbated our misery. However, our situation wasn't unique. A number of my classmates were already orphans. Others took care of sick, bed-ridden family members. In the delirium of hunger and stress, some parents lost their parenting skills and followed only the hungry voice in their heads.

Only the school remained an oasis of tranquility, a diversion from harsh reality. What's more, the blessed school gave all students hot soup for lunch, also a powerful magnet for hungry teenagers jailed in an ugly place, and deprived of the guidance and warmth of a normal family. Our teachers partially assumed the nurturing role, with Mrs. Rein as "mater familias." A tall, slim woman dressed always in black, she walked in fast, long strides on the school grounds. Her piercing gray eyes looked at us as if she was able to read every single thought crossing our minds.

The ghetto was full of paradoxes. One paradox was that our school became one of the last bastions of Polish culture in the Germanized city of Lodz, renamed Litzmannstadt by the Nazis. The ghetto chairman Chaim Rumkowski, who barely spoke Polish, and the Nazi Commandant Hans Biebow, failed to notice the school's Polish cultural structure. Mrs. Rein introduced foreign languages like Latin, German, Hebrew, and later Yiddish and Bible studies to camouflage the heavy dose of Polish.

Our favorite teacher was Irene Wolfeld. She was not much older than her pupils, and the gymnasium in the ghetto was her first assignment. Her round, open face and sparkling, large, brown eyes were not yet dimmed by the hopelessness of ghetto life. She put all her youthful energy into teaching.

“There’s always a tomorrow and tomorrow you may need Latin. Latin is a root language to other languages you’ll learn in the future. ‘*Disce puella Latine*’- girl study Latin.” Irene repeated the phrase and added, “Hunger is a physical sign of food deprivation and I can’t help you too much with that, but in a more sublime way, hunger for knowledge could be satisfied here, in school.”

We all loved Irene, but Halinka adored her blindly, changing herself from a mediocre student into an outstanding Latinist. She wrote poems to Irene in a battered Latin with more attention to defective rhymes than to the grammar. Irene corrected her poetry with a smile in her eyes and a straight face, patting Halinka’s head as if to lessen the brunt of her criticism.

Mrs. Zofia Prechner had been my mother’s Polish teacher. When I met her in the school, old age and harsh ghetto life had left visible marks. Although Mrs. Prechner was fading slowly away like an old soldier, she demanded knowledge of Polish writing and literature in her quivery, hardly audible voice. Because her vision was limited, she couldn’t move much, but she could always identify a gifted student and Yola Potashnik - tall, slim, blond and multitalented- was her favorite.

Yola wrote the best essays and poetry. She made little figurines from clay, sang beautifully, moved like a ballet dancer, and was the object of our admiration. One couldn’t compete with a girl whom Muses took under their wings. Mrs. Prechner was too old to conquer our hearts, too stiff to evoke warm feelings, too lonely to reach us. But she remained a superb teacher who taught how to read, understand and love books. She made poetry reading sound like music and helped us to comprehend and master the impossibly difficult grammar of Polish.

Mom asked me about school and Mrs. Prechner, saying, "I owe her so much. She taught me how to express myself clearly in spoken and written Polish, and my perfect spelling is the result of her endless dictates. I passed the entrance exams to nursing school in flying colors and graduated with the highest honors because of her. She was also the grand dame of Lodz's high society, the elegantly dressed wife of a well known physician." I couldn't tell my mom that the stylish dresses had become filthy rags and that I had been horrified to see lice crawling on her mentor's neck. I hated to see tears in mom's eyes. "She is still an excellent teacher." I said.

Nobody could compete with Mrs. Rubinstein. Tall, in a long dress that looked like it came from a fashion magazine of the last century, she walked briskly, keeping her back straight, holding her head high and carrying a black cane. Capped by a carved silver handle, the cane was a tastefully chosen accessory to this retrograde elegance – it never served as an assistive device for ambulation. Mrs. Rubinstein had the difficult task of teaching German, a language that we detested. It sounded in our ears like the barking of a hundred wild dogs. "*Raus, raus, schnell, Jude,*" and the hated new Nazi lingo like: *Gestapo, Kripo, SS, Sonderkomando* caused abhorrence and fear. Here she was, a lady looking like an old painting, strict and not maternal, teaching the language of our oppressors and making it sound melodious, interesting, human, poetic. How did she do it? I don't know. She was a miracle worker, a wizard who had the genetic make up of a wonderful teacher.

Mrs. Rubinstein taught us that the German language has nothing to do with Hitler and his followers. We learned that Germany had given the world glorious poets whose works we had to read and remember by heart, great writers whose books we had to study in their original beauty and splendid composers whose music we would hear one day in a symphony hall. We read the poetry of Heine and Goethe. Later Mrs. Rubinstein introduced us to the musical settings of their poems and from these *Lieder*, spoken German emerged as soothing and relaxing. She sang the *Lieder* to

us because the Nazis confiscated all musical instruments, radios and gramophones from us as soon as they established their presence in Lodz.

After the war, thanks to my great teacher who never identified Hitler with Germany, I understood the slogan “Hitlers come and go, but the nation remains.” Her legacy helped to remove the dark forest of hatred from my heart. Under the nose of the Nazi commandant, in the ghetto’s magic school, a Jewish teacher taught German culture and history in their clarity, verity and beauty to the Jewish children.

Mr. Cender, our handsome and young music teacher, one of the rare male teachers in the girls’ school, was a highly popular figure. His only musical device was an old piano in need of repair, but he was able to squeeze out melodic tunes from this malfunctioning and dying instrument. We attended his classes with joy and the high expectation of singing and learning music. Our chorus, with its soloists entertained Chairman Rumkowski who liked mostly Jewish folk’s songs.

Solo singing came suddenly and unexpectedly into my life when I became deeply depressed after my grandmother’s death. I witnessed her physical and mental decline and her slow agony. Grandmother’s body was removed quickly from our room and nobody could participate in the burial. School was my refuge but I couldn’t cry or talk of my loss for there was already enough sadness in our private lives, and nobody talked about domestic problems.

Instead of crying I started to sing a popular song and soon other girls joined me. “A star was born” and the star was **ME**. An unknown singing talent was discovered forcing me to nurture and improve the untapped gift. My career as a singer of prewar pop songs was not an easy task because – putting it mildly – I have an imperfect pitch. I sang off key quite often and the songs had a good amount of false notes, but nobody cared, because the sound gave us hope and reminded of better times.

Soon I realized that the old songs, full of “June-moon” rhymes, had to be replaced by new texts reflecting our current situation. Grand finale of optimistic lines also must be added to lift up our hearts. The makeover songs entertained my audience and even Mr. Gender, blinded by my popularity, selected me as a soloist of Jewish songs at the performance attended by Chairman Rumkowski to celebrate the first baccalaureates. The Chairman liked children’s concerts. We literally sang for our soup. After my solo, Rumkowski kissed my forehead and thanked for the song. It brought tears to his eyes, my name was recorded by his always present secretary, a photo was taken by his photographer, and my fame exploded after this event.

Recognition was a splendid feeling but I preferred instead to receive a thicker soup, or maybe an additional one, but my singing was not paid in food. Instead a kiss from an old man was my only gratification. Singing was a cheap commodity while a bowl of soup had a value of gold.

My audience demanded more songs. I delivered these without hesitation sensing that my career would be short and the strong voice is really a weird stroke of luck and not a gift. Mrs. Rein also noticed my singing. She sometimes came to our classroom, and asked me to sing, as if to rest and forget the constant nagging of the Chairman, who disliked the Polishness that emanated from the school.

Rumkowski sometimes visited the school. Mrs. Rein’s thin silhouette towered over his short, stocky, well-fed figure and her silence said more than his complains delivered in a raised voice. He didn’t like the school curriculum - too much Polish, too little Jewish and not enough religious studies. “After all there is a God in the ghetto, Mrs. Rein,” he reprimanded her, lifting his hand to the sky. Additional Jewish studies were introduced promptly, but Mrs. Rein did not receive more soup for her students and teachers.

In the fall of 1941 the school was moved to the wooden shacks of Marysin, the nicest section of the ghetto where in the summer the ghetto elite had their “dachas”

and agricultural plots. We had to walk one mile or more to the school. The penetrating cold of the fall made the teaching impossible. Dressed in heavy coats, with warm shawls on our heads, our shivering hands in winter gloves, we couldn't sit still on the benches. Mrs. Rein, recognizing this, gathered several classes in one room so the heat generated by our bodies could warm it up. To forget the cold and the rumbling in our empty stomachs, we sang and danced, shaking the wooden shack on its base. But dancing and singing provided only a one day remedy for the harsh Polish fall and oncoming winter.

The school in Marysin without warning or goodbyes suddenly ceased to exist in October 1941. With our school days at an end, we had to join the workers in shops, factories and offices. The ghetto was a small, restricted and dangerous area to walk in, and the long work hours plus the curfew, made home visits difficult, if not impossible. I never saw most of my teachers or schoolmates again; the majority died in the ghetto, in Chelmno, or in Auschwitz. I accepted the closing of the school without visible pain for I had to preserve my strength for more tragic goodbyes and events to come. And as young as I was then, I sensed that we were marching on the road to destruction paved with hunger, diseases and deportations.

I started to look for a job, like all of my classmates. We feared that without working, deprived of a daily soup and food rations, we would not survive another week. The photo taken with Rumkowski was my best trump card, but the Chairman was unreachable.

My mom found the best way of finding a job through her patient, whose husband was the head of a factory producing coats for the German Navy. He accepted me on the spot and the next day I joined three hundred workers in so called Gummi Ressor (factory). My happiness was complete when I spotted my classmate Ania Szymkiewicz, who embraced me saying, "Sally, come and join our group." I knew that on both good and bad days I'd be with a friend, and even bad days would not be so bad if Anya is around.

Postscript

After the war I met some of my classmates in Poland, Israel and the United States. One of them was Halinka, who discussed her obsession with our favorite teacher, our Latin teacher, Irene Wolfeld. Halinka recalled:

“My parents died early in the ghetto and in my mind I adopted Irene as my mother. In Auschwitz I saw her and barely recognized her, for she was in rags and her head was shaved. I was in transition to another camp, but I called her name. She turned her head to tell me, ‘Halinka, don’t give up, have hope against hope.’ The alchemy of her words gave me strength and her mere presence reminded me of who I was. I met her again in Lodz after the war and she urged me to go back to school. But I was alone, unable to start a new life in Poland. I spent a few nomadic years in Europe until I married and immigrated to the USA.”

I decided not to tell Halinka that I had seen Irene in 1989 while visiting Lodz. She was only one of two surviving teachers. Her husband had an absent look and her son was in Sweden working in the mines for there was high unemployment in Poland. She retired from her position as a Professor in the Linguistic Department at the University of Lodz. I sat in her living room at a table covered with old newspapers. The midday sun pitilessly revealed thick layers of dust on half broken pieces of furniture. Underneath her long, unkempt gray hair, she regarded me with brown, motionless eyes and selected her words with great difficulty. “Who are you, *Pani?*” she asked. Our common past was erased from her memory.

In May 1991, Mrs. Rein’s daughter, Wanda – a survivor of Lodz ghetto and Auschwitz – organized a reunion of the ***Magic School’s*** students in Israel. We gathered at a hotel at the foothills of the Judean Mountains. When I arrived, the lobby of the hotel was crowded and the conversations were in at least four languages

I recognized with some difficulty the loveliest girl in our school, Helena, who flew from Sweden. She seemed to be happy in the adopted country practicing medicine.

Anka resembled a slightly older version of the girl I remember and we recovered repressed memories of Yola, her best friend. Yola survived Auschwitz and Theresienstadt. Settling in Czechoslovakia after the war, she graduated from the Academy of Art in Prague and started a very promising career as a sculptress. I followed her post-war career closely for I believed that through her art she would be the spokesperson of our generation. In 1950, shortly before our meeting we had scheduled in Lodz, I received a letter from her husband saying that she committed suicide. Our faces were twisted with pain.

Wanda's daughter was a picture of her grandmother Mrs. Rein as a young woman. I couldn't take my eyes off the triangular face and the gray eyes that look at me with an indifference of a stranger. I wanted to talk of her grandmother but I couldn't find words that wouldn't sound banal. I let her pass by, but her face haunted me like a friendly ghost during the three days of the reunion.

I spoke to Ania, a survivor of Auschwitz, the mother of two sons and the wife to a "Sabra." She was more fluent in Hebrew than in Polish, but our friendship is alive in both languages.

The most interesting evening featured an open microphone –Wanda's idea. Everyone was free to go to the podium and talk to his heart desire. The podium was like a ship of many voices without a captain. Tola, a highly accomplished Pediatrician, sang; Sara rambled on without limits- two years later her book about Lodz-ghetto was published; Esther recited her poetry; and, Leo delivered a very funny monologue.

I wanted to grab the microphone and talk of our teachers, of my friend Stella Szafir whose young life had ended in a mobile van in Chelmno. Inspired by the image of Mrs. Rein in her granddaughter's face, I wanted to say that in spite of everything we were alive. It's true, we are a small fraction of the gymnasium's students but we are here: wives, husbands, mothers, fathers grandparents, doctors,

historians, poets, artists, chemists, and businessmen. The seed to persevere, to have hope and to study was planted in the school in Lodz-Ghetto.

But I couldn't open my mouth. I carried with me the undelivered speech which grew bigger and bigger in my head. The podium changed into Mount Everest and I couldn't climb it. It was a hot, starry night. The delicate scent of exotic flowers saturated the air, and pine trees stood motionless against the dark sky. A sense of timelessness had set in. We stayed awake deep into the night talking to whomever we could. We were tired, yet we could not sleep.

The next day we heard a lecture about the Lodz Ghetto given by one of its survivors, Professor Szmuel Krakowski in the Yad Vashem. I had to remind myself that I am alive in a Jewish land that was only a dream fifty years before; I was listening to a history lecture and the history was us- alumni of a unique institution run by a heroic faculty.

Decades after the war, we remained bound by memories of our gymnasium and our teachers. In one year, they gave us the yearning to read, to write and to analyze the world around us. For some of us, our formal education ended then. But the intellectual stimulation started in that magical school never died, not in the ghetto and not in the camps. It lives in us today.