In memory of Felusia

—Włodek

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Acknowledgments

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Foreword

For a very long time our father had been a man without a past. When we were growing up he almost never spoke about his childhood, his relatives, or how he had survived the war. We were aware of some facts: that he grew up in Warsaw, that his mother was a seamstress and his father worked as an accountant. We knew about his maternal grandmother and that his grandfather had once lived somewhere in the US. That was all. There were no details, no stories. Our parents' wonderful and loving friends became our surrogate uncles, aunts, and grandmother. We knew our paternal grandfather lived somewhere in a remote village in a Siberian forest against his will. He would eventually come to live with us for a brief time in Warsaw in 1956. What we did not know was that our father's silence and his refusal to speak about the past was typical of many Holocaust survivors. We did not fully appreciate that recalling his personal history and speaking of his mother, whom he loved so much, would bring to mind her terrible death in the Treblinka death camp. He felt great appreciation toward her for forcing him at a young age to join his father in the Soviet Union shortly after the war broke out, thus saving him from an almost certain death. In his book he declares that she gave him life for the second time. But he also felt guilt for leaving her behind, although he would certainly not have been able to protect her. He was equally unable to share stories about his grandmother and other relatives because the fate they had suffered was so terrible.

But Dad's past came alive in his memoir. He began writing it in 2006 in his beloved Polish and continued over a period of several years, referencing letters and notes on postcards and photographs he had kept meticulously for decades. Mostly he wrote from memory, using his profound intellect to bring to life the people and places of his youth. As we read his memoir we were moved to find answers to the many questions we had concerning those years. Initially he did not intend to have this memoir published; he simply wanted to share his life

with us, his daughters, before he passed away because he had found it so difficult to tell us about it. But as family members and friends and especially our mother read excerpts, we encouraged him to publish it, to tell the story of a world that no longer exists and about which virtually no eyewitnesses remain. He did not live to see his book published as a historical document by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw in November of 2013, but he was involved in every aspect of the process, including selection of the book cover and photos, many of which we had never before seen. Despite a number of controversial issues, the memoir was well received. He died three months before its publication.

The book opened a new vista for us. We had always known that our father was a polymath with outstanding accomplishments as a scientist and teacher. Yet we knew next to nothing of his childhood and his education, first in a Bund-run school where he developed a love affair with Yiddish literature and music, and later in a Polish high school, which gave him a life-long passion for learning. Here we learned the story of his escape from Nazi-occupied Warsaw, details of his life in Siberia, and how he came back to Poland as an officer of the Polish regiment of the Russian army, getting badly wounded along the way. The first two chapters of the book were a true revelation for us. They not only revealed our father as a young man, but they allowed us to understand the man he had become and grasp the reasons for his reluctance to share this part of his life with us. Through his words we were also able to "meet" our relatives: our grandparents, and our many aunts, uncles, and cousins, and catch a glimpse into their lives. We learned a great deal about the Bund's influence on our father's political views and about the rich Jewish life in pre-war Poland. The third chapter provided us with previously unknown details of our parents' life immediately after the war. It described how other Holocaust survivors tried, with greater or lesser success, to rebuild their shattered lives after years of horror and death. The many interludes that a family's history is made of were now in our grasp, for us and for our children and their children to build upon, continue the legacy, and never forget.

Dad concluded his memoirs with our family's immigration to the United States in 1967. It was a relatively peaceful and happy time in his life, no longer defined by struggle and adversity, but it was far from ordinary. In New York he continued his work at the Biochemistry Department of the NYU School of Medicine. Within six years he became a full professor and acting chairman of the Department of Biochemistry, securing NIH[1] funding for his work,

[1] Tr: National Institutes of Health (NIH).

PhD and MD/PhD candidates and postdocs. He saw his research published in prestigious journals and enjoyed invitations to chair sessions at national and international symposia. In short, he became a rock star in biochemical circles, publishing over 170 scientific papers. When he "retired" to San Diego, California, he continued attending seminars and enjoyed mentoring well into his eighties at Scripps Institute in La Jolla.

Perhaps his happiest years came with his grandchildren. Although an avowed agnostic, he used to say that his grandchildren had the ray of God in them. He adored them all and kissed them on their heads while tenderly holding their necks in his special "Dziadziuś (Polish for Grandfather) grip." He felt that they were the most beautiful children in the world and he eagerly conversed with them about the weightier matters in life, always with a pack of minty flavored Trident gum in his pocket to share. He called them on birthdays and if no one answered, he would leave a message singing birthday wishes. Our father was instrumental in instilling in our children the importance of education and in making the most of every opportunity. Each of the five had a unique relationship with him and each loved him a great deal.

Dad was a Renaissance man in the truest sense of the word. He spoke multiple languages and was a stickler for proper pronunciation and for never "throwing in" English words. For everyday interactions it was the language of the person he was speaking with—English, Russian, Yiddish, or Polish, with a preference for Polish. For counting he preferred Polish. And for his research, "symbols," of course.

He read literary works in the original and multiple newspapers in four languages. He was an expert on European art, music, and history and could regale audiences with factual treatises on any number of subjects. Even on his deathbed he recited poetry by Pushkin and famous Polish poets, which he had memorized more than 70 years earlier. He loved the Polish language most and taught us to use it precisely. He traveled tirelessly and he and our mother enjoyed touring European and American museums. He loved good food, good drink, and good company: wine with his evening meals and a dry Martini during symphony concert intermissions. Ever the congenial host, his bar at home was always well stocked for visitors who came by and there were many. Our parents, who lived in the heart of Manhattan for 26 years, frequently hosted guests, especially from Poland, often inviting them to stay over in their spare bedroom.

Our father's memoir provides a vivid tapestry of Jewish life in Poland in the past century, of its traditions, changes, and upheavals, and of the great turmoil

that dominated that era. He was honored to have his memoirs published as a historical document, making them available to readers other than us. We feel that the title "To Our Children" has a double meaning: it is addressed not only to us, but to our children, their children, and to children of generations to come. It is a record of a time and place about which so little is known, fascinating and colorful, full of horrors, heroes, and human frailty. It is a personal account of a war that must never again be allowed to happen. It is a story of hope and optimism in the face of crushing adversity and in no small measure it is, ultimately, a story of the triumph of the human spirit. We also hope that it conveys the remarkable man who was our father.

Karina Rothzeid and Ilona Szer

PART I

Before the War

It was the beginning of December 1939, the fourth month of the war. Posters glued to the building walls for several days now had been ordering us to wear armbands with the Star of David on the right sleeve. The armband's width, the star's size and colors—all were specified with German precision. It was then that Mom told me to flee Warsaw; to go and to stay with Dad. For some months Dad had been living in Baranowicze in eastern Poland, which had been taken over by Russia. Mail delivery was working so we knew Dad's address. We wrote open messages: postcards which were easier for the censors to read. I didn't want to go away and leave Mom and Grandma, but Mom insisted. I wanted us to escape together, but Grandma replied that sneaking across the border wasn't for her. Mom could go with me and she would move in with her beloved younger sister, Aunt Ewcia, who lived nearby with her husband, Uncle Isidor. But Mom wouldn't agree. She didn't want to leave Grandma Helenka. Besides, she said, there's war, lawlessness, and if we left an empty apartment we would lose it. It wasn't actually our own apartment, but a rented one. If we wanted to move out we would have to pay a so called withdrawal fee (in other cities called a key fee) and the amount was enormous, well beyond our means. Mom had other arguments as well. "I have seen it all during the last war. At first Germany wins and later—since England and France are mighty and also because Roosevelt will not allow Hitler's victory either—they will lose. It's just a matter of time and we cannot afford to forfeit the apartment. I remember them well from the Great War (as the First World War was then called). They wouldn't harm a woman. After all it is Beethoven's nation (Mom worshiped him). They took leave of their senses with that Hitler, but it is temporary. Calm down. This is the best educated

country in Europe. And you are tall, too tall for your age. They could sign you up for forced labor and take you away."

Such were the deliberations in those days and they couldn't have been any more wrong. No one is clairvoyant. This lasted for several more days, and finally Mom said that a neighbor of ours was going to travel east, beyond the Bug River, and that I had to go with him. This is how Mom gave me life for the second time.

It was completely dark that dawn when we said our goodbyes. I was fifteen, and I never saw her again. Now she exists only in my thoughts. She lives in my memory and in my dreams. The dreams come in cycles. I only see Mom's face, but I feel that she is in a crowd of naked people, forced with whips into a gas chamber. Mom walks, then runs and walks again for couple of steps. They are constantly hitting her. I can sense it, but I am helpless. Only Mom's face changes in these dreams. Sometimes it is beautiful and young—she was only thirty-nine when we parted, but sometimes it is older and wrinkled with strands of gray hair. I don't know where this image comes from since I have never seen her like that. Years after her death I would wake up my wife Felusia with my screams, tell her my dreams, and she would calm me down. The rest of the night would be sleepless.

I have been wondering: if I could push a button, launch a bomb and murder 95 percent of Germans as they had murdered us, would I do it? It is the nonsense of helpless rage of course. Years later these are different generations, innocent people. But was my mother guilty? What of collective responsibility? Didn't our forefather Abraham ask Yahweh (God) not to destroy a city if it had only a few (10) righteous among the people? Just so, but where were those righteous ones in Hitler's Germany?

Before the war, each movie was preceded by the Polish Press Agency's newsreel illustrating the previous week's most important events. So many times I watched enormous crowds cheering him. I remember most vividly Hitler's triumphant entry into Austria in 1938 after the Anschluss. He was standing in an open car, paw in the air with a sea of people on both sides of the road, their expressionless eyes glued to him, incredible screams. This was the truest, the most sincere kind of enthusiasm. It continued like this all the way to Vienna.

So what about that button? Let's leave it. These are idle thoughts. The whole thing is pointless.

My wartime wanderings started at the beginning of December 1939.

In my earliest childhood memories I see a beautiful woman wearing a coat with a fur collar. As I watch she enters a room full of people: Dad, Grandma,

relatives, and friends. This woman is my mom, who came back home after a lengthy stay in the United States. I was nearly four then and I didn't have sequential memories. This came later when I was about five. Perhaps I remember that moment with all the details because when Mom entered, Michał, Lutka's[1] husband (Ilonka hadn't been born yet), who was shaving, put his straight razor on the table under which I sat, almost invisible, and upon which I had put my right hand. Blood gushed, a commotion erupted, and possibly this is what I remember. I still have the scar. There was no bathroom in the apartment (among our family and friends very few had a bathroom in those days). Men shaved in their room. Since razor blades weren't widely used, they used straight razors with big, long blades.

From my parents and grandma's stories I know that Mom brought enough money from America for the withdrawal fee and from that time until the war we had an independent apartment: number 23 on 6 Karmelicka Street in the back part of the main structure, on the second floor. It was the third building from Leszno Street. The most expensive apartments were the ones in the front part of the building. They had rooms with windows overlooking the street. The further you lived from the front, the lower the rent. Until Mom's arrival we lived in a rented room with some family. Still, this independent apartment we moved into was far from beautiful. The front door faced the toilet door and the hallway was so narrow that both doors couldn't be opened at the same time. The toilet was tiny, somewhat triangular and very uncomfortable. It was cold in the winter because of the lack of heating. But at least we had a toilet. Among our friends many families had to use communal toilets, something every Warsaw apartment building had to have.

Our building was constructed in the nineteenth century, or perhaps earlier, without central plumbing. An alcove in a rather long hallway leading from the front door was separated from the hallway by a curtain. This alcove was very important because behind the curtain stood a little iron stove with a pipe going into the wall to the chimney conduit. That was our "bathroom." We heated the water in a big pan on the stove. A sort of small tin tub was suspended on the wall behind the curtain. It was placed on the floor so one could wash oneself in it with warm water in a standing or kneeling position. Bathing was a weekly ritual. Otherwise every day we washed with cold water at the kitchen sink, since that was the only running water in our apartment. The faucet and the sink—small and made of metal—were located in the kitchen's corner.

[1] Tr: The author's mother's best friend.

The whole process was neither comfortable nor pleasant. It was done in two stages; first from the top to the waist with a towel fastened around the waist; then from the waist down.

Dad often went to a public bath, sometimes taking me along, but I didn't enjoy it. In the late 1930s some of my parents' friends, for example Lutka Flutsztejn and Ruta, had bathrooms in their apartments. Mom liked to take a bath while we were visiting them. In her entire life, my mom never had an apartment with a real bathroom.

In the middle of the hallway across from the stove was a door that led to a room and the kitchen door was at the hallway's end. The room one entered from the hallway was square and a big window overlooking the back courtyard brought light into the room. It was the nicest room in the entire apartment. It was furnished with colorful, varnished pieces: a table, stools, and a big, glazed bookshelf. There was also a sofa where I slept. Plants were placed under the window and on window sills: a big rhododendron, rubber plants, and cacti. When the crisis[2] began and Dad lost his job, after 1930, and Mom started sewing dresses for girls, she received customers in this room.

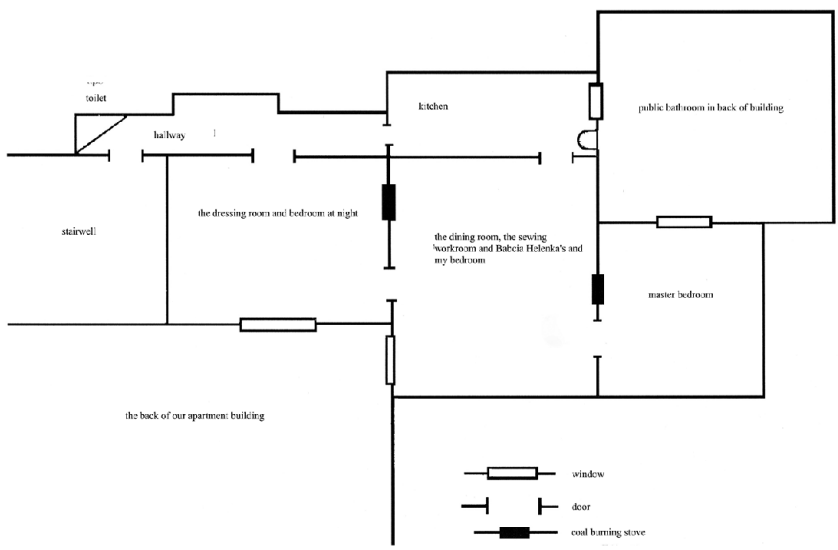

Figure 1 The layout of my parents' apartment on 6 Karmelicka Street, number 23, second story, back of the building.

[2] Tr: "The crisis" refers to the Great Depression.

Our kitchen was small and long with windows overlooking a "blind" small courtyard between buildings. In it we had a coal stove and an oven for baking. A gas plate with two burners stood on the stove. From the kitchen and from the first room one entered the largest room. It was long and dark with a single window in the corner. The room had a big table, chairs, a wardrobe, and Grandma's metal folding bed. That served as our dining room. During the day Grandma's bed was folded and looked like a small table. It was covered with a throw and had decorative trinkets, some figurines and such placed on top of it. The metal coils, mattress, and sheets were all hidden inside this "small table." It was also Mom's sewing room.

A door from the dining room led to my parents' small room, which contained a bed and a wardrobe. The room's window overlooked the same blind courtyard as the kitchen window. From this courtyard one entered a common toilet on the ground floor. In the summer, when it was hot we couldn't open windows either in the kitchen or in our parents' room because of the foul stench. For several years during the crisis after 1930 when we didn't have enough money to pay the rent, a tenant, Mr. F. (I don't remember his name) lived in this room. He paid almost half of the entire rent. For my parents this income was a great relief. They slept in the first, nice room. I slept on the folding bed in the dining room, which I shared with Grandma.

Figure 2 My parents and me, 1925.

Essentially no one had their own space. Mr. F. had to enter his room through the kitchen and the dining room. He was an elderly man, very nice. He tried not to be in the way. Usually he would leave in the morning and come back in the evening. He worked in some capacity at the reformed synagogue, The Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Street.

There were two tiled coal-fired furnaces in the apartment. Each furnace heated two rooms. One had a hearth in the first, pretty room with one of its tiled sides in the dining room. The second one had the hearth in the dining room and it also heated the small, last room. During cold weather the small metal stove in the hallway was used as well. In general the furnaces held the warmth for at least two days. Mom liked to stand with her back to the furnace with her hands touching the tiles when she was cold. I liked that too. The apartment's electric wiring was placed on the outer side of the wall. Apparently the electricity was connected to the building after it had been built. In some places on the walls one could see small metal gas pipes. At one time, before electricity, gas was used for lighting. I learned that from Grandma.

When I was five, a year before starting school, Mom's cousin Tuśka taught me to read. She used a simple and effective method. She would take me for a walk and read the letterings on shops' signboards aloud and I would repeat them to her. Tuśka was a good ten years older than I. She was very pretty and extremely nice. I liked her a lot. At the same time, before I began school, Dad taught me how to play chess. This was very important, because at the school I attended many boys played chess, and I wasn't any worse than they were. Chess playing has stayed with me for my entire life. It was also then that I had my first contact with music, when Mom took me to a concert at the philharmonic. Radio didn't exist yet, only screeching records and gramophones with a bizarre, huge tube instead of a speaker (You may have seen it on old ads and logos for RCA Records, "His Master's Voice," which featured a dog listening to music coming out of such a tube). For the record to turn, one had to wind the spring mechanism by hand. We didn't have such a gramophone, so concerts were the only source of music. Although Dad accompanied Mom to concerts, she was the real music enthusiast in our household. Beethoven alone occupied the apex, with Tchaikovsky and Chopin on the tier below. In my hierarchy, Tchaikovsky, whose music—especially ballets, but not exclusively—I liked a lot, would have figured less prominently. I am more partial to Bach, Mozart, and Haydn. My wartime generation seems to favor baroque's calm and classicism's restraint more than romantic exultation. Zeitgeist? Probably, but such lists and classifications make little sense. There is enough room in the pantheon for all great composers.

Figure 3 Karola Fajnsztein, 1919. That year my mother earned her High School diploma.

After the war, I liked Friday concerts at the Warsaw Philharmonic on Jasna Street. Until our departure I had a subscription and a seat in the fourteenth row on the left. In New York I had a subscription to Carnegie Hall, which I attended more often than Fisher Hall, where the New York Philharmonic Orchestra performs. Fisher Hall is gigantic, too overwhelming, but Carnegie Hall reminds me a little of the Warsaw Philharmonic. Even Carnegie Hall's bartender, a likable Irishman, knew me and during intermission, he would hand me my drink, a Martini, over the heads of the crowd besieging the bar. I would send him the money by the "return mail." During the last years before leaving New York I had a subscription to chamber music concerts at Carnegie Hall, where soloists or small ensembles performed in a smaller space. Somehow it suited me better than huge symphonic orchestras playing in the main concert hall, although it

did lack a bar in the hall. Tastes change with time and not because I love great virtuosos so much. To tell the truth, with some notable exceptions (Yo-Yo Ma!), I cannot distinguish between a great virtuoso and a competent performer. But my mom was very enthusiastic about great soloists' performances. Her favorites included the violinist Bronisław Huberman, pianists Artur Rubinstein and Witold Małcużyński, and the blind Hungarian, Imre Ungar.

Does great music inspire great work? Looking back it seems to me that good ideas for my lab work (if I ever had such at all) came to me after concerts at the Warsaw Philharmonic and later Carnegie Hall, so perhaps there is some truth to that. I had a similar feeling when vacationing in the mountains, but never at the seashore. I liked to write scientific papers at home, not at the institute or at the university, always at night when everybody was asleep and always quietly while listening to music, usually baroque, especially Pachelbel, Bach, or Corelli.

In the 1980s, I was able to organize at "my" New York University's medical school popular lectures on the theory and history of music. A professor at our university's School of Music, a musicologist and expert of harpsichord music, visited us once a week for four years at the start of the fall semester. He explained each work's interior structure and its origin. Everything he discussed was synchronized with excellent musical illustrations. He talked about the Renaissance and the Baroque periods, classicism and romanticism and, separately, operatic music. He also showed the correlation between the music, fine arts, and literature of each historical period. I found it all extremely interesting. I had been listening to classical music since childhood, but those lectures gave me a specific satisfaction that comes only with a basic understanding of theory. After several years, my music expert began to produce CDs with a similar theme. He was so successful that he no longer had time for lectures, which weren't nearly as lucrative. Too bad, he was very good and witty. He said that Bach and Handel were geniuses, but while Bach composed music for himself and for God, Handel did it for people and money and Bach won! He was about to discuss modern music, which would have been particularly useful for me, when all the fun ended. For many years I had to tolerate the unavoidable short conductor's inserts, known to every listener of classical concerts. Those inserts, say Sandor Ligeti, Carl Maria von Webern, or Arnold Schoenberg, were shoved between "real" music like Brahms, Mozart, etc. The first time I began to take such "inserts" seriously was in Warsaw. I had arrived at the last moment, straight from the lab to a Friday concert. I managed to enter the concert hall, but had no time to get the program. Of course I tried to guess what was being played—we all do it and

now I do it too when listening to the radio. It wasn't difficult: Bach. I looked at the program during the intermission and it turned out that yes, it was Bach, but, surprisingly, Bach's choral work arranged by Schoenberg. Well, so Arnold Schoenberg knew his craft and had he wanted to . . . But in that case could Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko also have painted a "lifelike" flower bouquet or a female nude instead of their doodles and colorful rectangles superposed on each other, if they wanted to? I later discovered that acceptance of contemporary music is largely a matter of familiarization and that acceptance of fine arts is dependent on some experience and understanding. We have to let a great artist lead us by the hand, remembering that Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" was booed in Paris (in Paris? yes, in Paris) in 1913. But how does one know whether one sees a future Amadeo Modigliani or junk because so many seek appreciation and . . . money. It's not easy, especially because vulgar snobbery and passing fads impede our judgment. Competence and experience help, and the divine spark that is so difficult to define is useful as well. And yet . . . and yet I'm not sure if 500 years from now people will visit an exhibit of, let's say Warhol, to see cans of Campbell's tomato soup in the same way they go to see Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel. The Russians have a saying for such a dilemma: "pozhiviom, uvidim."[3] But speaking about contemporary music: I was unable to convince myself that "I should like a particular piece of music because it was by a prominent composer" when I was listening to, for instance, Philip Glass' minimalist music. Only later when I watched a ballet based on his music did I realize how beautiful it was. And yet that is not how I reacted to Léo Delibes, Georges Bizet, Stravinsky, and other ballet music. It's all so strange.

There was a lot to see during my 30-year-long stay in New York. In the 1980s the Guggenheim Museum exhibited Wassily Kandinsky's retrospective. The building by Frank Lloyd Wright was already a true work of art; it would be difficult to imagine a more ideal fusion of beauty and functional solutions. Inside, the young Kandinsky occupied the top part: nothing special, good, post-impressionist art. But descending on perhaps the best-known spiral staircase in the world—and the paintings were shown chronologically—one could distinctly follow his break with representational art. Finally there were enormous canvases of "pure" abstracts placed on the lower levels in a multitude of colors and shapes. It is remarkable that many of that period's greats, such as Picasso and Georges Braque, who knew how to deform reality in various incredible ways, didn't cross the border between representational art and abstraction.

[3] Tr: Poshiviom uvidim (Russian): Time will tell (literally: we will live and we shall see).

There was a fascinating exhibit at the old Lexington Armory on Lexington Avenue that in fact was a repeat of a famous exhibit that had taken place 50 years earlier. It was at this same place in 1913 that American audiences for the first time were able to see European paintings from post-impressionists through pointillism, Van Gogh, fauvism all the way to Matisse, Picasso, and abstractionism. This was a time when American art was no longer in its infancy, but Europe still represented the authority in the art world. In the annals of American art, the Armory exhibit is considered a turning point that had shocked the public and even many art communities. Photos of several paintings destroyed in Europe in two world wars were now shown in their place; nothing was missing. New York press reviews from the original exhibit were gathered in the next room. It was incredible! People read them and laughed out loud as most of the reviews and opinions were decidedly negative. Some said that it was the end of painting and of art in general, that these were some indecent jokes of nincompoops and people devoid of talent who didn't know and didn't understand Art with a capital A. It would be difficult to imagine a more enlightening event. It was 1963. I was working at the NYU medical school at the time and hardly ever left the lab, but I couldn't say no to such an exhibit. The Armory on Lexington Ave is within short walking distance of the school. I was in New York for a year without my family. Felusia and the girls had stayed in Warsaw as hostages—literally. I had to leave them since that was the accepted norm in that hopeless "socialism"—downright barbarism. Permission to go abroad was a favor accorded by the rulers, that is, by the owners of the Polish People's Republic. And yet Poland had been considered, and perhaps rightly so, as the best part of the entire Gulag (from Russian: Glavnoye upravleniye lagerey i koloniy; Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Labor Settlements). It was much harder to leave other socialist countries for scientific training in the west. Indeed in Russia it was almost impossible. Some years later, in 1967, after the Six-Day War in Israel and after the anti-Semitic campaign started by Gomułka[4] and other dimwits—Poland's owners ("ciemniak"/"dimwit," a term made up probably by Stefan Kisielewski[5] to describe the sham communist elite that was ruling Poland; I don't know of a better one). Later, when it was time to leave Poland, my year-long work at NYU medical school's biochemistry department proved to be very important to our entire family.

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[4] Tr: Władysław Gomułka (1905–1982): Polish communist leader, head of the communist party and of the Polish government from 1945 to 1948 and from 1956 to 1970.

[5] Tr: Stefan Kisielewski (1911–1991): Polish writer, composer, publicist, and politician.