

I Remember Drohobycz

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It is now over 60 years since I left Drohobycz. It was a gray, gloomy morning when I kissed my father's and mother's hands and, with a heavy heart, hugged Stella Bartischan, my fiancée, goodbye. My sisters, Pepka and Marianka, did not get up and come to the station. After all, I was to come for a visit for Passover, so it was no big deal to see me off. I was going to study in Italy.

Actually, I wanted to study at the "Uniwersytet Lwowski"—the University of Lvov. I graduated from the State Gymnasium (high school) with good grades. Most Jewish parents did not have the opportunity to get an education, and they denied themselves in order to give their children one in the hopes that their children could live a better life than they did. The children found an unfriendly atmosphere and anti-Semitic teachers in the Polish schools and most dropped out after a few grades in order to help their parents earn a living.

Only the hardest and best learners could proceed to high school, graduate and qualify for higher studies. My father hoped I would study to be a rabbi. My mother believed in my ability and gave me strength to persist, finish high school and go on to higher education.

Half of the students in Gymnasium were Jews and so were about half of the teachers. The Jewish students were in the top half of the classes, but in most cases paid full tuition. The town had only one public library. It cost 10 groszy a day (about 4 cents in 1937) to borrow books. We had a strong drive for education and culture: when friends met the first question was "What are you reading?" followed by a discussion of the subjects. Education was the only thing that could not be taken away from us.

At the University of Lvov, as at all others in Poland, the "Endek" (abbreviation of "National Democracy") students were imitating their Nazi (National Socialists) counterparts. They proclaimed "a week without Jews," forcing Jewish students to use the rear "ghetto benches," often beating them with canes outfitted with razorblades, and sometimes pushing them out of third floor windows. The government did nothing about it: the police had no right of access due to medieval privileges of universities. This situation was not for me, and the only alternative was for me to study abroad. My father would not let me attend the technical Institute in Haifa because of Arab rioting. He didn't want to risk his "Kaddish" (the only son.) My mother sold some family heirlooms and saw to it that I go "temporarily" to study in Italy, at the university in Pisa. On that December morning, however, we had a premonition that we would never see each other again.

Located at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, Drohobycz was an administrative center for the oil fields of its sister city, Boryslaw, and it had a number of oil refineries in the suburbs. At the edge of town flowed the river Tysmienica covered with a multicolored film of oil. Nearby was Truskawiec ("Strawberry Village"), a resort with mineral waters and

beautiful “villas” (hotels), in the midst of a coniferous forest full of the aroma of resin. That’s where Stella lived.

Drohobycz played an important role in the history of the Jews. They settled there as early as the 1400s, and in the 1500s its Kehilla (Jewish community) was represented the Council of Four Lands (the autonomous Jewish government). There was a blood libel in 1718. A prominent Jewish woman, Adela Kikenis, was falsely accused in the death of a gentile child. Though secretly found innocent, she was never the less given a choice between conversion and death. She chose death. Her body was to be dragged by a horse through the cobbled streets. Her last request was for a few pins with which she attached her skirt to her body to keep it covered. Her martyrdom inspired Yitzhak Leib Peretz to use it in his story “Three Gifts” (see “A Golden Treasury of Jewish Literature,” by Leo W. Schwarz, editor: New York, 1937).

Drohobycz had a Jewish villain, Zalman Wolfowicz, in the 1750s. He was a royal tax collector and head of the Jewish community who tyrannized Jews and gentiles alike. Eventually convicted and sentenced to hang, he was ransomed by the Jews. He then converted and ended up in a monastery. The historian, Maier Balaban devoted a chapter to this in his story “Yidn in Poyln” (“Jews in Poland”) (Vilna, 1930).

The Jews of Drohobycz suffered in World War I from Cossacks and then in 1918 from Ukrainians who proclaimed a republic. In 1919 it was the Poles who took over and treated them as enemies. The interwar years brought relative peace, even though there were pogroms in other Polish cities.

The Jewish Population of Drohobycz could be divided in to three groups: the Chassidim, fervently religious: the “modern Orthodox,” more enlightened: and the secular Jews, mostly professionals and much assimilated. The later believed that, if they “Polonized” their names and lifestyles, they would be accepted by Poles as equals. Then there was the “golden youth” whose motto was “carpe diem” (enjoy the day). Their basic activity was to have fun. In contrast, the Zionist youth believed in learning and preparing for a better tomorrow by building a homeland in Palestine.

Drohobycz was known for its charities. There were many who became rich in connection with the oil industry. There was hardly a Jewish home that did not invite a “Sabbath guest,” a stranger in a synagogue or a visitor in town. A number of institutions were based on the mitzvah of charity. Beggars did donors a favor by letting them fulfill this mission.

In the 1840s, a Jew, Hecker, was prospecting for oil in Boryslaw, and soon thereafter Abraham Schreiner of Drohobycz produced kerosene from petroleum and built the first oil refinery. For some years most oil refineries were owned by Jews and most oil workers were Jews. A number of Jews in Boryslaw became rich when oil was discovered on their land.

The Chassidic movement had a number of famous followers in Drohobycz. Foremost among them was Reb Yitzhak “Drohobyczer,” friend of the Baal Shem Tov, who visited him there. Early masters were Reb Yosef “Drohobycer” Ashkenazi and his son, Reb Israel Nachman “Drohobyczer.” Of the later leaders best known were the Shapiros: Reb Chaim Meir Yechial,

affectionately called “Chaimuni” (1863-1929) and his son, Reb Abraham Jacob (1886-1962) who was a member of the Austrian parliament.

Aside from the Chassidic rebbes (“admors”—abbreviation of adoneinu-moreinu, “our master and guide”), there were a number of distinguished rabbis in Drohobycz: Elijah Horshowski, a longtime beloved leader in the 1800s, Reb Eliezer Nissan Teitelbaum, of the famous Sighet-Satmar dynasty, Isaac Leib Sofer (Schreiber), son of the “Chatam Sofer” (Moses Schreiber), and Jacob Avigdor, the last Chief Rabbi, a descendant of Rabbi Avigdor Kara of Prague (d.1439). He was outstanding scholar—a rare Orthodox rabbi who got a degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Lvov University. He survived the Holocaust.

Drohobycz had dozens of synagogues, Chassidic shteiblech, and study houses. Each Chassidic group had its own synagogue: Komarno, Sassover, Sadagorer, Boyaner, Belzer. My father and his father were followers of the Sadagorer rebbe. The Great Synagogue was the most impressive one. It was tall, supported by massive square columns, with narrow stained glass windows. On the walls and columns were painted prayers and psalms. The holiday services were beautiful.

The Zionist movement found many enthusiastic adherents in Drohobycz in the 1870s. A copy of “The Zionist Idea” (Arthur Herzberg, editor: 1966) has a stamp of an early Zionist youth organization in Drohobycz on the cover. In the 1880s, Aaron Zupnik started publication of “The Drohobyczer Zeitung” in German with Hebrew letters.

At 13 I joined a Zionist youth organization, Hanoar Hatzioni. Besides scouting we were—in a real sense—attending a self-help school for our physical and spiritual development. The main subjects in “Kvutzot” were: Hebrew, Jewish history, history of Zionism, Zionist literature, geography of Palestine, and Jewish music. It was a second Jewish education. For many underprivileged boys and girls it was the only education above grade school. We often sang Hebrew songs of love and longing for our homeland late into the night. It gave us the feeling of identity and love of our people.

There were a number of Zionist organizations of all shades in Drohobycz, from the right-wing Beitar (Revisionist) to the left Poalei Zion (Socialist). In addition, there was the Agudah (strict Orthodox) which opposed Zionism as preempting the Messiah, and the anti-Zionist Bund, which believed that the future of the Jews lay in building a socialist society in Poland.

In 1937, a young law school graduate came to Drohobycz to work for the Zionist attorney, Dr. Zvi Arnold. Two years later he married the boss’s daughter, Aliza. The guest of honor was Vladimir Jabotinsky. The bridegroom was Menachem Begin.

Three famous artists, natives of Drohobycz, deserve mention: Maurycy Gotlieb (1856-1879), painter of Jewish themes, Ephraim Moses (Max) Lillien (1874-1925), illustrator and printmaker, and one of the founders of the Bezalel School for Art in Jerusalem: and Bruno Schulz (1892-1942), painter, graphic artist, poetic writer, and, incidentally, my Gymnasium teacher of art, who was shot by a Nazi on a street in Drohobycz.

When the Germans came in 1941 the Ukrainians who lived in the area welcomed them with great joy and started pogroms against the Jews. Poles were denouncing Jews who sought

protection and hunted them in the fields and woods even after the war was over. Many survivors came here with gruesome stories about the Polish "Land Army."

Before World War II there were some 17,000 Jews in Drohobycz (about half of the total population), 13,000 in Boryslaw, and 15,000 in the surrounding villages. Of these 45,000 Jews, some 3,000 escaped to Russia; about 865 were left alive in bunkers and woods: over 41,000 were killed by the Nazis. My high school graduating class had 28 pupils. Of them 14 were Jews, and only four of us survived. Some of the stories of these Drohobycz Jews is told in the Drohobycz-Boryslaw Yizkor book and in "Out of the Ashes," by Leon Thorne, a survivor. In Martin Gilbert's "The Holocaust," there are several episodes of the martyrdom of Drohobycz Jews, and a photo of the group of Nazi officers who were there in charge of the slaughter. One of them, Felix Landau, kept a diary, now in the Yad Vashem archive.

In the 1930s many German refugees came begging and telling us what happened in Germany. We heard their stories, gave them food and clothing and never imagined that we would experience the same fate and worse. It was my fate never to return to Drohobycz. When life became difficult for us Jewish students in Italy, my family warned me not to return to Poland, because I would be drafted into the army. Instead I traveled to the United States where there were relatives who could assist me. My life was saved, but my family perished in the Holocaust. That day I left for college was my final farewell to them.

Today Jewish Drohobycz is gone. Gone are the rich and poor...Chassidim and Maskilim (enlightened)...parents and children. May their memory be a blessing. Their death is to us a mandate to live and to build a Jewish life that will survive hundreds of years to come.