

In 1947, there may have been over a thousand Jews in Bialystok, but by 1948 over half had left, including us. By 1950, there were only a handful of Jews left in the city. The Jewish revival died in infancy.

In Bialystok, while we sought to emigrate we also found some stability.



Class photo: Chaya 3rd row, 3rd from right, in front of Zwi.
Zwi 4th row, head turned to his left.

Although I was communicating with hand signals in Polish, I spoke Yiddish freely. I was enrolled in the Bundist Yiddish School, in mixed classes with children from five to ten and beyond in the same class. I learnt Yiddish songs, which we sang as a group from the stage in the communal hall. I remember being applauded for



Bialystok classroom, Zwi 2nd row centre

reciting a Yiddish poem.

Of course, being in Poland meant I interacted with some Poles. They called my Gjegus, my third name.

It was a school with children who had suffered greatly, so a holiday camp was created in the forest near Bialystok. For the first time I could play, have fun with the other children and make friends. We stayed together in huts and I clearly recall the scent of the forest, the flowers and the fresh air. My mother had been the cook for the



Gitel as cook and nurse at camp, with Chaya and Zwi

orphaned children in Russia before we went to Fergana, so she became the cook and nurse for this camp.

In 1948, according to my mother's



My mother had prepared for my bar mitzvah by buying a sidur and tefillin a year earlier

calculation, I was twelve, but really fourteen. Somehow, I was in the Group Secular bar mitzvah held for thirteen-year-olds that year and I received a certificate. I wasn't required to read from the Torah.

All the adults in Bialystok were encouraged to work and most did. Cooking was something my mother was good at. While I re-learnt Polish during the time we were in Bialystok, I was being introduced to many new subjects, as you would expect at school. This is where I learnt to read and write the Yiddish alphabet.

As joyous as this school was, it was closed the year after we left Bialystok as there were too few children left.

The city may have been destroyed, but simple pleasures existed. I found a plank of wood in the snow and discovered that I could balance on it while hanging off the back of a horse-drawn sleigh. I was literally skiing my way round Bialystok, jumping from sleigh to sleigh. I was in a dream world of joy, listening to the crack of the whip as the horses galloped through the snow, breathing steam through their nostrils when they gathered speed. I became adept at hanging on and revelled in the excitement of a high-speed ride. The drivers at times didn't appreciate this hitchhiker and would yell at me to get off, or at times flick the whip in my direction. Occasionally, they would strike me, but I didn't care for I loved my form of skiing.

It was truly cold, that Polish winter. When extreme cold enveloped the city, my breath would form icicles as I breathed out. It was so cold I remember urgently needing to pee and my urine freezing in an arc as it hit the wall.

In Bialystok, there remained some twisted iron bars and a section of the former dome, which were all that remained of the former Great Synagogue. It was at the end of our street and I would clamber through the rubble. It was burnt down after the Nazis herded 2,000 Jews inside and bolted the doors. Petrol had been poured onto the floor and a hand-grenade thrown in started the fire. As the building blazed the screams rose and then faded to silence. Outside, the Poles watched and danced in glee, it is said.

Whatever else I have heard of the Holocaust since does not match the horror of this event in my mind. It has left me with a hatred for both the Germans and the Polish people. I will never forgive or forget, for as a teenage boy I could not imagine that a human being could deliberately burn to death another human being.

In 1948, there was another commemoration service at the cemetery, which I attended. A tall monument was unveiled. Speeches were given and Kaddish was said for those buried in the mass grave. I was now not so much of a loner, for strangers would befriend me and tell me of their experiences. I was being immersed in all aspects of the 'Shoah' long before the word had been invented.

We needed assistance to emigrate. We applied for a visa to Israel, the USA and Australia. Israel because my mother's youngest sister, Aunt Bruria, was there and it was where Uncle Daniel had been heading, but it was 1948 and Israel was on the brink of the War of Independence when we applied. My mother felt she couldn't risk her children in another war.

In the USA there was an uncle, my father's brother, David, who had left well before the war, an uncle my mother didn't know. He was known as a 'black sheep' for he left in the mid-thirties after a serious falling-out between him and my grandparents. His bitterness was well demonstrated when a year after he left, a parcel arrived at his parents' home in Bielsk Podlaski containing everything he wore when he left, even his shoes and socks. David never reconnected with the family. All we knew was he had two children and served

in the US Army and then died very young from an illness. It is likely he would not have responded to our request for help with sponsorship or a visa.

In Australia, my father's sister, Aunt Rose Lewin, whose married name was Glow, had migrated with her daughters in 1939, just before the war; we turned to her.

The Bialystoker communities throughout the world offered assistance to those trying to leave. The Bialystoker Centre in Melbourne assisted by helping fund the fares for those going to Australia and getting visas.

The major support for the refugees in Europe at that time came from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, commonly known as 'The Joint'. They supplied Bialystok with food, clothing, books and school supplies. Between 1945 and 1950 they sent out an army of professionals to help look after the 420,000 Jews displaced in Eastern Europe alone. The Joint spent much of its time assisting migrants to leave Europe. One hundred and ten thousand went to Israel in the year we were looking to migrate.

It was The Joint that assisted us, for there exists a single-page document from The Joint archives in Warsaw indicating that on 18 May 1948, Gittel Lewin and her two children, from the street address Kopiciecka 30, Bialystok, left for Paris.

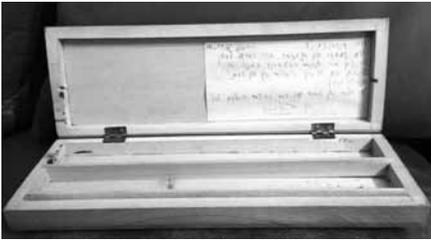
Australia had been the first country to accept us. I remember saying to my mother, 'Where is Australia?' My mother didn't know, so we found an atlas and discovered Australia was at the very bottom of the world.

The Judenrat, or town council, was at 30 Kopiciecka Street, so I wonder if this address was used for convenience. The street has since been renamed Icchoka Malmeda in honour of the Jew of that name who threw acid in the face of a German soldier in 1943 at the start of the liquidation of the ghetto. He was hanged a day later. Malmeda Street has been rebuilt with modern buildings, but has retained its heroic name.

Rose Glow sponsored our visa to Australia. She had married

Nachum Glogowski in Bielsk Podlaski in 1921. Nachum changed his awkward surname to Glow after he arrived in Melbourne, a common response to the Australians of the time having difficulty with foreign names. Nachum Glow was involved in the fabric industry and he had come alone to Melbourne in 1938 to help Mr Leon Fink, also originally from Bialystok, set up a carpet factory. Rose arrived in Melbourne in April of 1939 on the *Ortonto* from London, sponsored by her husband Nachum. She came just in time. She had her two daughters with her, Dassi, then aged six, and Naomi, sixteen. Nine years later, it would be Dassi, the schoolgirl, who suggested I change my name.

When we left Bialystok, my classmates at the Yiddish school collected money and presented me with an engraved wooden pencil case, which I still have. Inside this pencil case was a farewell message to me in Yiddish.



Pencil case inscribed with farewell from Bialystok school

While in Bialystok, my linguistic ability had increased further. I could now speak Yiddish, Uzbek, Russian, Lithuanian and now some Polish. Within weeks I would be learning French as well.

I was not sorry to leave Bialystok. In 1971, there were five Jews recorded as remaining in the city. The Jewish mass grave where I attended the memorial cemetery in 1948 was excavated in 1971 and the memorials removed to allow the city to redevelop this prized real estate. The complaints of the Jews of the world about the desecration of a holy grave were ignored.

There was no attempt even to try and restart a Jewish community in Bielsk Podlaski.

I was fourteen years old when I finally left Poland.

To get to Australia took many months. Unlike today, it wasn't a matter of a couple of flights and a bit of jet lag. First, we left Bialystok to go to Warsaw. We were still in Poland, but it was where The Joint had its Polish headquarters and where our immigration documents had been prepared. The Joint funded our travel and housed us in their distribution centre for the few days we were there.

The Joint was moving many people. Of all the countries that Russia had annexed after the war, only Poland had open borders for those trying to leave in 1948. The problems we had leaving Lithuania were not repeated. These open borders were opposed vehemently by the British who saw so many Polish Jews going to Palestine where they were in direct conflict with the British soldiers defending their mandate.

By the time we were leaving, the newly formed Israel was in conflict with its Arab neighbours and the British were no longer involved and so no longer cared. We were lucky to get out when we did, for not long after we left, Poland threw out The Joint, the UN Refugee organisation, the Jewish Agency and all the other bodies assisting the Jews to leave. The borders tightened up and Yiddish schools were banned. The Communist State was coming in hard and was yet another reason for the remaining Jews to get out while they could.

While in Warsaw I roamed, on my own, as always. The ill-famed Warsaw Ghetto was just a pile of rubble, which I duly explored. There had been tunnels used by the Resistance to escape from

under the ghetto and I found the entrance to these. They led to putrid-smelling sewage canals, which as I entered I discovered I was sharing with very fat rats scurrying about me. The rats, the intense odour and a sense of claustrophobia terrified me. In running out as fast as I could on the slippery stones, I found myself exiting outside the walls of the original ghetto. This must have been the path those fighters had used.

LEFT FOR 197

INDEX CARD		A. J. D. C. EMIGRATION SERVICE		Warsaw	
Last Name	LEWIN	Case Nr.	2987	File No.	2987 E.
First Name	Gitel	LEFT FOR	Poland	Opening Date	
Address	Bialystok, Kupiecka 30	OR	18 th Sex 1948	Date	
Birthdate	Birthplace	In transit from
Nationality:	Present	Former	Accompanied by		
Occupation:	Present	Former	Herszel Chaja		
Country of destination	Australia		Closing Date	

Warsaw office card, from Joint archives

After collecting our travel documents, we left Poland for the last time. Poland may be listed in my passport as my place of birth, but that is a dry fact, an accident of birth. It is not and never will be my homeland, nor have I any desire to step foot in that country again. In 1939, there had been 3,500,000 Jews in Poland. Ninety per cent were then murdered. They made up nearly half of the Jews who died during the Second World War. Deaths attributed to the Nazis, but the Poles had been enthusiastic assistants and were hardly innocent as they so desperately wish to portray themselves in recent times.

If my last image is of fat rats in sewers, then let that be my memory of the country of my birth.

When The Joint was expelled from Poland, all administration was then moved to the main European headquarters in Paris. This is where we were now heading. The train journey from Poland took us through Czechoslovakia and Hungary. At each European border our papers were inspected by the Police before we could pass on. Each inspection would cause a wave of fear because we were yet to trust those in uniforms.

Paris was the largest city I had lived in. Moscow might have been bigger, but I didn't explore it as we stayed close to the station waiting for a train back to Lithuania. Paris was also less damaged by the war and, though still recovering with political issues, housing shortages, food rationing still in place and the widespread disease of overcrowding, as well as tuberculosis, it was the first city where I could feel free and safe.

In Paris, The Joint had a central administration office which provided meals, housing and transport and dealt with thousands of refugees. We were allocated a room in The Internationale Hotel at 49 Boulevard de Magenta, Paris 10, a grand name for a very basic hotel and while the clients were all truly international, they were, like us, all Jewish refugees. There were beds, but no other furniture as we lived out of our suitcase. On each floor was a washroom and a single toilet to be shared by all. We were on the third floor and I got fitter by running up and down those stairs, as there was no elevator.

All these years later and I can offer you an invitation to visit the former Internationale Hotel. It is now a two-star hotel renamed the Est Hotel. Seventy-seven rooms and, as the reviews suggest unkindly, the rooms are so small it may best be suited for dwarfs. The position in Paris is excellent – not far from the Bastille. The hotel was only 200 metres in each direction to the metro stations of Chateau d'Eau and Jacques-Bonsergent, named after the first Parisian civilian executed by the Nazis when they occupied Paris in 1940.

We were provided with one food coupon a day for each of us. This meal was a spoonful of meat and a plate of rice. I used to eat



Gitel, Zwi and Chaya in Paris, 1948

by myself, so I'm not sure what my mother ate, but it was certainly not at the restaurant we had coupons for, as it was not kosher. I was no longer hungry. I was growing stronger and was full of teenage energy.

There was no school for the months we were in Paris, so the nearby metro was my schoolyard and my playground. I met some boys of my age who I remember didn't speak Yiddish and as a loose gang we occasionally roamed together. However, I was enough of a loner to be satisfied to spend my days exploring the city by myself. The metro was close by and the daily ticket allowed travel as many times as you wanted in the day. It must have been very cheap. Each day I took the metro, headed underground and emerged blinking in the sunlight at another station.

We didn't know how long we would be in Paris. Often my mother would take us with her to The Joint offices to ask when we would be likely to travel. The Joint had thousands to transport and only so many shipping berths available. We would queue for hours just to be told to be patient.

So while my mother worried, I entertained myself on the trains.

I learnt the names of all the stations in the metro system. When I got out at a station, I would see the local sights, but couldn't afford to enter the museums such as the Louvre where payment was required.

My sister who also wandered on her own was more enterprising. She discovered that by walking backwards through those exiting from the Louvre, she could enter without paying. This became her favourite destination. I always thought I was the street-wise one and if I had known her tactics, I too would have joined her. She had also found a bicycle which she rode around all day. While I explored underground, Chaya was exploring in the sunshine. She was also getting stronger and healthier. Having the bicycle



Chaya in Paris, 1949

meant she could travel further, so my mother had Chaya and a friend go a few times a week to some nearby farms to watch the cows being milked. This ensured the milk was kosher, important to both my mother and my sister.

I saw many of the famed monuments. One day I found myself at the Eiffel Tower. Climbing the Tower was free and by chance on the day I was visiting, they were organising a race to run up and then down the Tower. They divided us into groups, separating the children from the adults, and the children by age group. I found myself in the under-twelve group, which is the age I believed myself to be. I must have been small compared to the French children.

The children in my group were fast and I was about five behind when we reached the top. My practice on the stairs at the hotel was helping as I passed four of the runners on the way down so that I

was in second place nearing the end. When going down stairs, just before the end I jumped off the steps and landed in front of the boy who had been leading.

I had, with that last leap, won the race. An army officer bedecked in medals came up and kissed me on both cheeks and presented me with a medal. As excited as I was, I could not share my excitement with my mother, for she never saw value in any sporting achievement and didn't react to my winning the race. The medal has been lost or left in Paris.

We needed to get medical certificates for entry into Australia. We all passed, and after my race I knew I was very fit and healthy. However, I wasn't as strong as I thought, I soon discovered.

One of the attractions in Paris was the Moulin Rouge Theatre. This fascinated me, with all the lights shining brightly on the building, music being played and well dressed couples buying tickets and walking in to the shows. As I had no money and being underage, I couldn't go in.

There were posters with half-naked women plastered on the building, but to attract the passers-by you could watch the stage door where the performers entered. They also had clowns performing outside. I especially enjoyed the strong man who would lift an iron bar with weights over his head and challenge anyone to come forward and do the same. I actually came up to him and asked if I could try it. He laughed, but agreed. With all my might I could feel the iron bar move, but couldn't go any further. I collapsed after, but I remember everyone cheering me for trying.

In Paris I learnt a bit of French. This was my sixth language.