

## Our Life in Lida

This chapter is dedicated to my immediate family.

### Father and Mother

Father, the only son to Moses and Zipora Manski, was born six years before the onset of the Twentieth Century. Mother, born in 1894 or 1896 to Joseph and Rasha Jerzewski, met my father after he returned from a German prison camp, he having been captured while serving in the Tsarist army during World War I. They were married in 1919 at Chanuka time. From the pictures I've seen, they were a handsome couple.

Father completed a gymnasium level education. Mother did not attend any schools. In those days girls, especially Jewish girls in orthodox homes, were forbidden to study secular subjects. It was their duty to be good wives, to bring up the children, and to help the husband make a living.

As I write this, my mind starts to go back to my early childhood, trying to recall my mother. I realize now the direction that she gave to our lives. Whereas my father was a quiet man, satisfied with his lot, mother was quite different. Two examples will illustrate what I mean.

First, it was mother who took the actions that led to my escaping Poland. I shall describe all this later. The second incident occurred when I was looking for a job after arriving in the States. Father took me to a machine factory on Albany street

in Boston. When Mother heard this she was very upset and made me look for something else.

At home in Lida mother was in charge of the house. She also spent a lot of time in the store we owned. A maid named Nadja lived with with us and helped mother. Nadja did the chores, cooked, and took care of us.

In remembering father I have to acknowledge the little time he spent with us. I remember him in my early years as always being busy, working in his produce factory and travelling from village to village selling. There were no cars. He travelled by horse and wagon, in the winter by horse and sled.

Father was very active in the volunteer fire brigade. If there were any problems between my parents, they were due to the fact that my father spent a lot of time playing cards in the firemen's club. Consequently, mother had to attend to the business more than necessary. I remember no other issues that created problems. There were rumors that father had some affairs, but these rumors created no real issues, to the best of my memory. When my parents wanted to discuss things that children should not know about, they spoke Russian, a language in which they were fluent. Although I did not know Russian as a child, I did learn it later, following the Soviet occupation of Lida.

I remember very little of my parents' social activities, except for one occasion, a firemen's ball. I saw my parents really get dressed up, mother in a gown and father in his fire department officer's uniform, which he wore proudly. I must have been no more than six or seven years old at that time. I shall never forget how handsome they both looked.

I see now that my family in Lida had middle class status. My sister, brother, and I received education in private schools from kindergarten through high school. We had a live-in maid through all these years. We lived in a nice house in a desirable area. We were dressed nicely, but not too often with new clothes. I remember getting new shoes and clothing for the

holidays, some times in the spring for Passover and other times for Rosh Hashonah. As I have said, my parents were hard-working. I now think that they tried to maintain a status they couldn't afford. I am sure that my mother's brothers in the States helped us financially.

The last house we lived in was located in a court, not far from our store. Living in a court was not unusual in Poland and, perhaps, not in Europe. It was a wooden house. I remember best the way it was heated in winter. In the center of the building was a fireplace that extended to the tile-covered ceiling. Each room touched part of the fireplace. In this way, the room could be heated.

In the kitchen there was a stove. Above it was a shelflike bed. The bathroom was inside the house. We got water by pumping it in the sink. The windows were double, creating an insulating vacuum. I do not remember if we had separate bedrooms, but I do remember the kitchen, the dining room, and many plants in the house. We had a beautiful silver samovar that we had to leave behind.

Our house was strictly kosher. I remember many times using the wrong utensils, mixing meat and milk. This would make my mother very upset. She would take the item and place it in the soil of a plant for a few days as this was the custom to make it kosher once more. My father was not religious but he did observe all the holidays.

There is very little I remember regarding the childhood of my sister and younger brother. My sister was born a twin but the other child, also a girl, died at birth. I do remember when Shlomo was born in April 1928. He was delivered in the house and I remember father sending me out to my grandparents. Perhaps I remember so little because nothing exciting happened and because we never had a serious quarrel among us. Our interests were not the same. From age eight on, I belonged to the Hanoar Hatzioni youth group and participated in sports. Naturally at that time my sister was not interested and my brother was too young. So we went our own ways. To this day our relationship remains on good terms.

## Growing Up

My early recollections of myself begin when I was taken by my mother to be enrolled in kindergarten. There was nothing exciting about it except that she took me there holding my hand. After a year or so in kindergarten, I was enrolled in the first grade in the Tarbut Hebrew day school. The Tarbut school system was a private one, supported partly by the community and partly by the parents of the children who attended each school. The education was secular. Hebrew was the language of instruction for math, history, geography, bible, etc. The only other language used was Polish; the history of Poland was taught in Poland's native language.

I was enrolled in first grade in 1926. I still possess my report card. It was very unimpressive. I received all Cs except for a B in tardiness and an A in behavior. When I read my report card recently, I noticed that I was absent 72 days during that first school year. I do not remember the reason for such an abnormal number of absences. I wish I had noticed this before my parents passed away.

A year later, I was required to repeat the second grade. I felt very bad as my friends were not with me anymore. Missing 72 days in the first grade must have taken a toll on me. During all these years, I never realized that this must have been the reason for my not being promoted.

The years I attended the Tarbut school were not too eventful. I do remember that one year we had a woman teacher. She was short and stout. Every time she wrote on the board, she moved her body up and down while writing. One day she turned from the board and found the class was laughing because I was imitating her. I was taken to the principal's office. He took me by the collar of my shirt and threw me down the steps. I never did anything like that again.

Attending the Tarbut school was an important factor in my life. The education I received there instilled in me a feeling for Zion. Even in the darkest days the thought of a free Palestine gave me and my friends hope. Learning the Hebrew language and reading its poets made me feel part of the past and on the



way to the future. The devotion of the teachers to the cause of Zionism is reflected in my devotion to Israel and to our people to this day.

I spent most of my time after school playing soccer and volleyball, ice skating in the winter, and participating in the Zionist youth movement, Hanoar Hatzioni. As I grew up, I reached positions of responsibility in the movement. A few years before World War II, I became the leader of the Lida branch.

As I write this, news has reached us about the death of Neta Chertok Elitov, a close friend. Neta was part of my generation that survived the War. She was in Japan while I was there and, after Pearl Harbor, was interned with many other Jews in Shanghai. Neta was part of my city Lida. May she rest in peace.

Growing up in Lida had its advantages. Because the town was small and cohesive, I knew almost every one. My friends were from school and from the Zionist youth movement. I spent each summer vacation mostly around the house, sometimes helping in the store and in the factory. In July 1932, at the age of twelve, I was sent to a summer camp called Toz, located near a river in a town called Nowojelni. That same year, my mother's brother Willy and his new bride Sadie visited my grandparents and us; perhaps they were responsible for my going to the summer camp. The only thing I remember about this camp was spilling out milk with a lot of cream on top onto the ground while we were eating. To this day I don't drink plain milk.

My only important possession while growing up was a pair of skates that I used constantly during the winter months. We attached our skates to our walking shoes. A steel plate with a hole in the middle was clamped to the heel of each shoe. The back of the skate was fitted into the hole. The front was clamped directly to the shoe.

We skated in the fortress not far from where we lived. The town maintained the skating rink in good condition at all

times. In the evening we skated by the glare of lights and beautiful music. It was really wonderful skating with the cold breeze and the music playing. Many times I lost the heel of a shoe while skating.

### 1933

In 1933, when uncle Benny, who lived in the States, came to visit us to look for a bride, something occurred that left a permanent impression on me. My mother's sister Esther gave a reception in honor of my uncle and his future wife Fanny. Any visit from America was in those days a really big event. Many people were invited. Among them were my parents, my aunt's brother-in-law and sister-in-law, and their two sons, the oldest being my age. I was the oldest in my family but was not invited. I still can remember the hurt. The reason the others were invited was their financial status. Class distinctions were very important in the daily life of the Jewish community in Lida.

The year 1933 was a year of sadness and a year of excitement for me. In that year my maternal grandfather Joseph Jerzewski died, on the fourth day of Passover. A few weeks later my paternal grandmother Zipora Manski passed away. This was a tragedy to me and it took some time to get over it. 1933 was also the year that Hitler came to power in Germany. The feeling of what it was to be a Jew in Poland became stronger.

This same year, 1933, was the year of my Bar Mitzvah. Even though I spoke and read Hebrew fluently, my parents secured a tutor for my Bar Mitzvah lessons. The prayer book that I used for my lessons was the one that my grandfather Joseph used in his daily prayers. This is the Siddur that I carried with me to the United States and use always for special occasions. When I travel to Israel I take it with me and pray from it at the Wall in Jerusalem. I am sure that this would have made my Zaide very happy. The Bar Mitzvah was uneventful. I read the Torah and the Haftora. After the conclusion of the services, we

had a kiddush. I received one gift from my new aunt Fanny, skates. That was all.

## High School

The Tarbut school system in Lida covered only the primary grades. There was an excellent Tarbut high school in Vilna but this was too expensive for me to attend. So, after completing the Tarbut school, I was enrolled in Lida's business high school, named Prywatna Koedukacyjna 3–Klas. Szkoła Handlowa Z 4 Klasa Specjalna O Kierunku Spoldienym Kolegjum Ks. K Pijarow W Lidze. I began my first year there on the 20th of September, 1934, and completed the three-year program on June 16, 1937. One year later, I completed the special fourth class, a college preparatory program.

In Poland, every high school student was required to wear a uniform. On the sleeve of the jacket was attached a number, revealing the type of school and its location. If I remember correctly, the number of my school was 333. We also had to wear special hats. When we were graduated, the top of the hat was embroidered. Mine was embroidered by my girlfriend Fryda; more about her later.

In many respects, high school began a new life for me. For the first time, I was thrown together with non-Jews, and in a Catholic school at that. The school was run by an order called Pijarow. This order was similar to the Jesuits, who maintain many schools and colleges in the United States. Most of the teachers were brothers or priests. The school was located on the main street in town, on church property. I spent many hours in the church rectory playing hooky.

Attending high school was a major event in my day. All of a sudden, schooling propelled me to a higher social standing in the community. As I explained before, education was one way of getting status and I achieved that. I started to have non-Jewish friends, male and female. In a nutshell, I was emancipated but did not forget who I was.

It was while I was in high school, in 1937, that my father left Lida for the United States. At that time, I became the man of the house, with some responsibilities.

A few incidents during my high school years still remain with me. I recall that a Catholic brother (a step before becoming a priest) renounced his order to marry one of our teachers, a very beautiful girl. This generated quite a commotion.

Once, on a break between classes, a few of us who had attended the Tarbut school were discussing in Hebrew how we could help each other on a coming exam. We did not realize that our teacher, a priest, was listening. Imagine our surprise when the priest spoke to us in perfect Hebrew. Needless to say, our plans failed.

In my junior year, a new priest replaced the rector. Whereas the old rector had been very fair to us Jews, his replacement was an anti-semite. His first decree was to separate the Jews from the non-Jews in the classroom. The Jews were to be seated on the right side of the room and the Christians on the left. This was to start with the freshman class. We objected and were told that the new rule would make it easier to check attendance during Jewish holidays. Henceforth, a teacher would just have to look to the right and see that no Jewish students were there. After our protest, the edict was rescinded. Anti-semitism was rampant in Poland after Hitler came to power. The action of the priest was not surprising.

In my last year of school, our class went on a trip to visit many cities in Poland. Father was in the States. I was fortunate that mother made my trip possible. Before I left, my mother told me that, if anyone should ask the time of day, I should refuse to answer. She said that, if I did answer, the person would steal my watch, given to me by an uncle from the States.

This was my first trip to visit far-away places. We travelled by train with the priests as our guides. During the train ride the priests, who were in a separate compartment, helped themselves to a flask. When we teased them, they replied that they



were taking medicine for a cold. We all started to cough and asked for the medicine. The priests started to giggle.

We stopped in Warsaw, a large beautiful city with the river Vistula dividing it. We saw the parliament, museums, and everything worth seeing. In Warsaw, we went swimming. There, I almost drowned. Since then I have had a fear of the water.

We visited Krakow, Czenstachova, and Gdynia, a port on the Baltic Sea. The last stop was Danzig, on the Baltic. Danzig was then a "free city," with many Germans living there. That is, the city was under Polish administration but enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, much as San Marino does within Italy. World War II started in part because the Germans wanted to annex Danzig to Germany. They ultimately failed. Today Danzig is a fully Polish city, known by its Polish name Gdansk.

Visiting the city, we saw German signs and anti-Polish slogans. The mutual enemy drew the Polish students closer to us Jews. That was the only time that they forgot that we were Jews.

When my father was in Lida, my sister and I had to be home at a specific time. If I was late, there was hell to pay, though father only once laid a hand on me. I don't remember why but I do remember getting it.

After father left for the U.S.A., I became more daring. I recall two occasions. Once I visited a school girl who lived quite a distance from my house. She was not Jewish. Mother went out looking for me and, when she finally found me, she was furious. I still remember her face when she saw me. I'm sure this will sound familiar to my children.

Another time, my friends and I went to a bar and I really got drunk drinking vodka. It was also the first time that I ate ham. I became sick to my stomach. When I came home, mother made me lie down on the sofa. She put cold compresses on my head, repeating over and over "good for you, it serves you right" while at the same time attending to my discomfort.

During father's absence, I broke my right arm while playing ball. I was taken by friends to the hospital, where the arm was set. For many years after I felt great discomfort in bad weather.

After I graduated from high school I worked for my Aunt Esther making ice cream and helping out in their bakery. I worked there until the start of World War II. When father left, we thought we would follow him shortly. That turned out not to be the case.