

Memories of Mlynov

Aaron (Berger) Harari from Mlynov

A transcription from Hebrew tape recordings of Aaron by his son Zeev Harari. Date of original recording not known. English edited by Howard I. Schwartz, PhD, descendant of Mlynov families.

Recording 1: Childhood Memories

Before World War I, at the age of 3-4, I started learning the Alef-Bet in a Cheder חדר Early in the morning came the assistant teacher, the Melamed מלמד, who helped me getting up and get dressed. The children used to sit on one bench. The Melamed turned to one of the kids, holding a stick made of a bone and pointing to one letter. The pupil rehearsed after him: Alef and then referred to another letter. The kids were sitting quietly. They brought with them garments in case they should change. We played with buttons, and when I already knew how to read a Sidur, even without understanding the meaning of all the words, I was transferred to a higher grade (at the age of 4-4 1/2 or so) to read in the Chumash חומ"ש, the first book of Bereshit. The Rav used to translate from Hebrew into Yiddish. That is how we, approx. 20 kids, spent the part of the first day. The Cheder was near a small lake full of rain's water and at times of frost we were skating on the ice. After lunch at home, we returned to ice skating.

The Rabbi used a whip, 40-50 cm long, that at its end were tied leather straps, and he whipped a kid who was not attentive to him. We decided to be smart alecks [in English we sometimes say "smart alecks": we brought a box full of sticky tar, and applied his chair with a thin layer, [that] wasn't noticeable. When he rose up in order to whip [someone], the chair rose with him. We did not gossip about each other. When he left the room, we snuck in and smeared the whipping rod in garlic. Then [it] becomes brittle and the stick breaks in his hands. This trick (תעלול Kuntz) moved from one classroom to the next.

My parents concluded that ש"ס holy subjects were not enough, and that I should study writing as well. Nearby, there was a school for writing. The teacher taught how to write letters and to string them together into words and for a few sentences, like it was a short letter. He wrote on a page of a notebook a different letter on each line. The pupil had to look at the structure of the letter and had to fill in the the line copying the same letter. I got it pretty quickly. When all of us knew all of the letters, he wrote one sentence in Yiddish, "I went to America" and afterward another one and so on.

Kalman, who was older than I, knew already how to write. Shaul, who was older than both of us, studied in the class of Moshe Chizik's brother. At that time there was a private teacher, named Fux

פּוּקַס,¹ who came to our home and taught Russian and general studies. Each lesson lasted one full hour. When teaching geography, he explained on a map the various countries around the globe, as well as natural studies. For example: he lit a candle holding it close to the open door and showed us how the flame reacted to cold which flew from the outside, and what happened when he raised the candle up. Hannah, my sister, also studied with him.

Till today I do not have an idea how my brother Sol immigrated to the US. He did that before WWI. At that time there were talking around about drafts of youngsters to the army. Parents wanted to prevent this when their children reached the age of 17. There was a "Macher" מאכער who used to help crossing the border to Galicia, about two hours drive with a horse-drawn cart, in return to a decent payment. My father gave Sol a marked handkerchief and only when he got safely to the border and crossed it, Sol gave the Macher the marked handkerchief, who brought it to my father and was paid for his 'service'.

Sam Berger sent Sol a recommendation for affidavit for a residence permit in the US, so that he could arrive to America.

There were Traders, shopkeepers and some professionals in Mlynov. The transportation between towns was with horse-drawn stagecoaches. Our family, my father and my uncle, held the main monopoly franchise for transporting of passengers and goods to Dobno, Rovno and Lutzk. Our horses were white, which made our service identifiable. From those travels, Father brought us dried fruits, halva and more.

Grandpa and Grandma from our Mother's side lived with us. Grandma fell ill in one of the births (deliveries) of her children which made her crippled – [creating a] partial paralysis of the body. Our home had three rooms and a large corridor and sukkah. We left its roof... [?]

Recording 2: WWI and Being a Refugee

When the WWI broke out, I already was 5 years old. Horsemen, infantry, and artillery were spread all over town. Once in a while, when the principal/ Director of the District showed up, there was a day off from the Cheder. I would then wander around among the soldiers. Then I also "served" as a "merchant", selling my mother's rolls to the soldiers along side the road. I was standing holding in my arms a baking pan. I was asked, "how much?" and answered, "5 Kupikas". I managed to sell many dozens of rolls.

We heard shots fired from a distance, until an order was received from the authorities to evacuate to the other side of the Ikva River. We had to pack our belongings, and since there was no transportation, we used our horse-drawn carts. We loaded our beds, kitchen wares, flour and

¹ [Editor]: There was a Fuchs family who lived outside of Mlynov and became Fax and Fox in America. Possibly one of their members.

more for an absence of two weeks... This was the first time I had seen my dad crying, stroking the walls and mezuzahs while we were already sitting on the carriage waiting for departure.

The adults gathered and discussed the situation. We arrived to a town about 35 km from Mlynov. It was close to the High Holidays. We did not unpack, got a room and all of us slept on the floor. The butter was not fresh any more, but with a slice of dry bread we boiled water in a kettle, or samovar and lived there in malnutrition. The war front spread over a vast area. On Kol Nidrei, when I was in the synagogue, there was not an electrical light, but candles and flashes of lightning from the cannon shelling penetrated inside. As a young child I did not assume that adults could cry. It was really a tragedy of refugees who were fleeing for their lives. There was not any organized aid for the situation of hunger and need.

At one point, we reached the outskirts of that town where the Christian graveyard was and we saw dead soldiers, deep open graves, and uniformed soldiers threw amputated limbs into those deep mass graves and covered them with soil. Those pictures did not at that moment cause us any shock, but at night I suffered from nightmares.

That period continued for months so we decided to return home to Mlynov. But it turned to be a mistake because the war front was still active in all its power – bombs from the air. Our home was broken, the windows and the roof were shattered. We settled for awhile at home, but it was dangerous for there was not a shelter. Nearby our home, there was a large basement with rooms which we made our shelter.

We slept on the floor; we were prevented from lighting stoves in the house so that the enemy would not see the smoke and bomb us. So we lit a fire at night only. Shaul used to dig in the field for potatoes, radishes, carrots. Mom cooked potato soup, and together with dry pieces of bread we had our meal. When the shelling stopped people got out of the basements and heard what was going on in the surrounding [area]. There was one time when I heard cries from a distance. It was an attack which raised the cries of the wounded. The adults said that the attackers used knives and swords.

In the passage between two houses, we set up earth batteries in order to defend ourselves. It happened that once my grandpa fell off his bed because of a blast. We hoped this situation would pass. Then soldiers came and told us that we should leave within 12 hours and we should pack, and withdraw. There were rumors implying that the offensive was coming and that the town would be wiped off the map. Dad parked the carriage behind the house and early in the morning we drove away and arrived to a military base. It was the first time I saw a balloon which was held tied with a rope by the soldiers all day long. We drove east about 50 km and got to Rovno, a large town. Dad told us that we were supposed to greet the soldiers with "Hello". As soon as we got to a house that our uncle arranged for us, we found it to be a small one – one and a half rooms with a

kitchenet. It was occupied by the Chizik family, Moshe Chizik's brother. But we had to leave because of the bedbugs. Dad found another room at the home of a baker who sold bread to the army. There granpa passed away.

My parents tried to put me in a local school and moved me from one school to another...

Recording 3: Life as a Refugee

In comparison to the cheder in Mlynov, I could not get adjusted to the rules of the school until I got to the Talmud Tora in which I studied reading and writing in Yiddish as well as basic arithmetic. Dad wanted me to enter holy studies in another school.

As a child, I was spending time with student peers. We made kites, played as soldiers, went out to the forests on Saturdays. But at times of war our situation at home was difficult. We had one loaf of bread per day. On the streets I saw and smelled food, and tasted remnants of meat – Bread with Ducks' grease. Once a Jewish person stopped me and found an interest in me. I told him that we are refugees and he saw that my shoe was tied with a string because the sole tore and fell [open]. So he advised me to tell my parents that in the main street near the train station there was an institute where I could get new shoes, and so it was.

Those days we lived close to a military hospital. I saw there similar sights to those I experienced earlier in our town – soldiers with crushed legs, injured bodies, bloodstains. As a child it was hard to bear those views again.

A message was announced, that within 24 hours we should go east. There was a fear that among the refugees there were some spies who might help the enemy. Dad tried to get a restraining order with the authorities, and he did prove that Grandma was half paralyzed, and then we stayed there a while longer.

Dad found out that there was a possibility of returning to our town, Mlynov. He hired people to refurbish our house and return it to us. We packed again and drove back home at night. In the morning, I saw in front of me that the whole town was dug up with defensive trenches, specifically around our house. Dad covered them for the time being with wood panels [to prevent] against falling into the open trenches. I did jump over them without falling down.

Families of refugees returned, most of the town was empty, a few stores opened up. The synagogue was locked, its doors and windows were replaced. We still found much of the army in town. The army had been placed in abandoned houses. At our place lived a platoon of about 10 soldiers and this served us as a source of livelihood.

Mom baked bread and rolls in the morning and in one hour we sold them to soldiers in neighboring

houses. Dad went to town and brought sacks of flour, and the soldiers helped him out to unload them. On Christmas the soldiers arranged the synagogue with a stage, a decorated Christmas tree and played their orchestra with ballads and danced Cossack dances.

The army stayed only a short time and in the end of the winter began to retreat eastward without fighting. So the town was left empty. Then came the Germans and conquered almost all of Ukraine, and [reached] not far from Kiev, where two of our uncles – my mother's brothers - were living. As a child, this was the first time I was exposed to modern equipment that the Germans brought to the war front, such as a battery-powered flashlight. This contrasted with what I have seen used by the Russians.

When the Germans were established we decided that the parents' brothers should share with us the expenses for Grandma who required special care. We took her on the train to our uncle in order to leave her with him, but he somehow convinced dad to take her back to Mlynov in return for a sum of money, some things, and belongings.

As a result of this incident, my brother Shaul, who was 16 years old or so and wanted to continue his studies, went to that rich uncle (bakery owner) and planned his higher education. Shaul became a close friend with his daughter and had a long romance which led to his marriage to her when he was 19-20 years old.

At that time, an unstable political situation began against the Tsarist rule in Russia. The Germans withdrew from Russia and were replaced by the cruel, Russian, left-wing government of the Marshal Pator. They began to take revenge on the Jews who grew beards and cut their beards with the swords. It was really a horror. The farmers in our region took advantage of the chaotic situation for robbery and looting at night.

After a period of unrest, even though there was a civil guard, we continued to make our living from agriculture – wheat, barley, rye, hay, as well as breeding two cows for cheese and butter. Later, the great and powerful faction of the Russian Bolsheviks entered. We got friendly with them and a cultural activity began in the public garden when they played their orchestra. Then began the Polish War of Independence. We experienced the military attack along the front line between Poland and the Bolsheviks not far from us – and again we were living under shells and shooting during a period of a few months. Once, when dad was not at home, Rosa and I escaped and found that the safest place was under Grandma's bed.

[At the end of this recording Aaron refers to the later period he was already in Merhavia]:

When I used to send photographs from Merhavia to my parents, they wrote back and asked why I was looking so skinny. The fact was that I was working under the sun in the fields. But I answered that I always was like that since the times that Mother sent me to school with a little food – a slice

of bread with a piece of sugar... Today I am sorry I wrote a letter with such an excuse.

Recording 4: Back in Mlynov

When we got to the table, we saw the bullets which penetrated the wall and the floor. Had we not bent down we could have gotten hurt. There were attacks by air and by commando troops at night. They captured young boys in order to use them to lead cows to slaughter. Once when I walked to take my father his meal where he was working in the field, I was afraid that they would catch me. So I pretended that I was lame with a cane. On the way, a shelling occurred, so I found shelter under the bridge. When I reached my father, he told me that he had heard the bombs.

As a child, I started learning Gemarah גמרא in a new cheder. I prayed twice a day, waiting every evening after the Maariv prayer and then returned home with my father.

On Hanukkah we played cards which we made by ourselves, as well as dreidels and ate levivot (cakes). It was not enough for us. The economic situation was worse. An epidemic of deaths broke out almost every week and there were funerals. The doctor was helpless as to how to get through the evil decrees. There was a belief that in a situation like this people should go to the grave yard and pray there, and cut the lapel of the garment. I feared that I too could die. I felt shame to talk about those fears. Then it was customary to pump water out of wells and pour it out of the tub because of superstitions, like the angel of death drowning the food in water.

A modern school was opened and conducted purely in Hebrew. New registered teachers came. The pupils who earlier studied in a cheder transferred to the new school. I was examined and knew how to read, and my brother Karl studied there. We studied a few subjects and a new era was opened in my life. There were ballroom dances, I participated in a choir and a play with a motif of Eretz Israel. Also a children's magazine from Eretz Israel appeared and reached us in school.

At that time, the nest (ken) of Hashomer Hatzair was established. At the time it was a small one with two groups – a young and older one. Karl was my counselor (madrach). The activities were not very sophisticated – in the summer they were held outdoors. When the fall arrived, it was stopped.

Later on, I studied in a public Polish school. In the afternoon, we went to a Hebrew school. It was not easy to deal with two schools, so we chose to stick with the Hebrew one only. I studied subjects which interested me – natural and life sciences (biology, the secrets of life, Bible and Geography). I asked the teacher questions which he was unable to answer. I flipped through books and I was never content with that. I participated in a choir and a play with a motif of Eretz Israel and when I grew older I had an influence on the ordering of books by the library dealing with science topics.

How did I change from being religious to secular? In Bible studies, the verse which enhanced and strengthened my faith and helped me make this transformation was from the book of Amos (Chapter 5:21-24). "I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies." שְׂנֵאתִי מְאֹסְתִי חֲגֵיכֶם, לֹא אֲרִיחַ בְּעִצְרֹתֵיכֶם. כִּי אִם תַּעֲלוּ לִי עֹלוֹת וּמִנְחֹתֵיכֶם לֹא אֲרָצָה, וְשָׁלֵם מְרִיאֵיכֶם לֹא אֲבִיט. (הַסֵּר מֵעָלֶי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, וְזָמַרְתָּ בְבִלְיָהּ לֹא אֲשַׁמְעֶה. וַיִּגַּל בְּמִים מְשֻׁפָּט, וַיְצַדֵּקָהּ בְּנַחַל אֵיתָן" (פרק ה', פסוקים כ"א-כ"ד)

This [verse] cancels the prayers and offerings to God, that have no sense. It produced in me an inner revolution and I stopped praying and putting on tefilin (תפילין) as well as wearing a yarmulka (כיפה). As a result, I had a confrontation with my father. On Yom Kippur, as a maturing boy, I arrived at the conclusion that the fast was not necessary, but outwardly I went to the synagogue, though, with my friends who felt as I did, we ate in the forest.

I read books written by Shalom Ash, Shalom Aleichem and more, literature which had a touch of a more realistic subject. I subscribed to a weekly which dealt with biology and health, education and psychology of the child. I probably was the only one in town who had read the three volumes written by Sigmund Freud on the question of sexuality, and Darwin on the origin of man, as well as historical materialism, dialectics, things that formed in me a rational and philosophical view of life. I also read a daily newspaper while Karl read a Yiddish daily. In the eyes of my peers, I was unusual in town, not walking in a well-trodden path.

I also painted signs for shops and commercial houses. To the best of my knowledge, I was the only one who did that in Mlynov.

In addition, I professionally dealt with binding of books and magazines for libraries, synagogues as well as a doctor and pharmacist.

[Recording 6: Life in Poland After the War](#)

The economic condition at home was not so good. Wheat and oats were the few agricultural crops we grew. Karl used to work hard; he took over the harder jobs at the farm. My sister Hannah also participated. During the times off from school I used to give a hand. In the early morning I carried with me my homework and I did exercises of botany and nature. I also grazed the cows and led the horses to the field in the afternoon. We did not work a lot of time in agriculture because the owner of the estate demanded that we should give it back, so then, mostly mother used to milk the cows and we settled for a small dairy.

Karl who was about 17 years old, left home immigrating to Argentina. He wanted to go to the US in order to get to Sol, but there was a quota, so he went to Argentina with a friend of his. Since he was used to working in agriculture, he worked in the Jewish colonies there, operated by J.C.A. [Jewish Colonization Association, a company founded by Baron Morris Hirsch in 1891, with the aim

of assisting the settlement of refugees from the Russian Empire in America and especially in the colonies of Baron Hirsch in Argentina] which lasted longer (6 months) and was harder than it was at home. Karl hesitated and we advised him to stop working there and return to Buenos Aires; there he worked in the production of beds. Sol helped him with money, and there was a Macher מאכער who got him a fake passport.

I stayed at home and created paintings. After a short period of time my father and uncle as well as another person, won a bid for franchise of transporting governmental officers with carts and horses. We held it for approximately two years, till we canceled it because it was not profitable enough. Father had good connections with owners of estates. He got a job to advise them about working animals, testing and purchasing them. He acted as the last arbiter for them. He would come to their homes before Passover, got a contribution of Kimcha DePasscha אָדער אָדער [a special charity fundraiser for Passover] for the have nots. The Gabbai posted a note in the synagogue saying that my father was the person who got the contribution. My father was proud of his giving. The owner of the estate visited our home on Friday, ate pickled fish and rested on the sofa, and it was an honor in our home. My father was accepted among the authorities including the police. The police wrote reports on opening of businesses on Sundays, and Father took care of it. I helped father preparing holidays packages for the Christians and delivering them to the police officers' homes.

My Father dressed carefully, his shoes were brushed and held a stick in his hand so that his appearance would be as dignified as is customary in men's fashion, and the house was always clean.

My father and uncle hired workers for manual work with shovels and baskets and with the help of horses. My mother used to bake bread for the whole week – challah and yeast cakes. She milked the cows until we were left with only one cow for personal use. Hannah used to help with the domestics, ironing, knitting, heating the oven.

We kept Grandma at home. She passed away in a good old age in my arms as I helped her sitting on her bed for dinner. Her room became my room and a painting studio. To our home many young boys came to visit, especially in the winter. In the summer we met for fieldtrips and hiking, as well as sailing in the vast Ikva river. Rosa had a circle of older friends who swam while the girls did not. We were 5-6 youngsters on a boat. It was dangerous. We also went skating, played volleyball with government clerks, and soccer.

Then I developed a desire to learn a respectable profession – dental technician. But after a couple of months, it did not appeal to me anymore, and I dedicated myself to Zionist activity in Mlynov. In addition to the involvement with the Hashomer Hatzair nest which I revived and managed, I invited the young parents who had children in the kindergarten, for a gathering and taught them

about education for preschool age children. When I was in a seminar in Warsaw I met a young teacher certified to work with kindergarten children. She met the parents and made a great impression on them. This led to the opening of the first kindergarten in our town. During Hanukah and Purim we held parties for the kids, and the adults prepared entertainment. The income from that activity contributed to our cultural activity.

I was at that time the counselor (Madrach) of the older group. [The subjects] included the anatomy of the human body as well as sexuality. On Saturday night I answered questions on those matters. On Lag B'Omer (33rd day of counting the Omer) we used to have a distant hike to the forest where we erected tents, enjoyed cooking, playing scouting games and dancing around the campfire.

I had another occupation – in the area of medicine. Vitamin deficiency was common and doctors used to give a prescription for vitamin injections. In our town there was a Polish medic busy with work. The head physician, a Polish one, had once received a painting of mine from my father. Given that he already knew of me, I once dared to talk to him about my desire to perform the injections independently for my family and relatives. He tended to agree. I sterilized in line with my understanding of the right way and he asked me to show him how I was doing the injection on a shirt sleeve. Since I did it correctly, I passed the test and he let me inject the vitamins for my family members and relatives without payment for that service. In fact, I did inject some other people, and that practice was remunerated.

I also practiced journalism. I wrote to a Yiddish daily which was published in Warsaw. It was a special section dedicated to the outlying towns, in which I described what was going on in my town. I also contributed my writing skills to a weekly which appeared and circulated in the town of Rovna. I was very active and had satisfaction from a life full of meaning.

At the age of 21, I was supposed to be drafted into the Polish Army. Those days it was customary to avoid the draft and fast for a duration of about two weeks before the draft. We walked a lot, rode on bicycles, ate food dipped with castor oil which caused us to throw up - in order to lose weight and so as not to be accepted into the military service. Close to the day of the checkin, I rode [on a bicycle] a distance of 35 kilometers with a short break of a half hour. On the actual day to be in front of the military committee, I drank a bottle of coffee. Since I have known that it could cause [elevated] heart beats, I said that it was a medicine. I also complained of a noise in my ears and elevated heartbeats. I passed the check ups from one doctor to another. After a consultation they sent me on a train, accompanied with a policeman, to experts in a military hospital in Rovno. He 'delivered' me to the police in the train station. I begged that they would let me visit my relatives in town, but their excuse for denying it was that two guys have not returned back on time. So they locked me up until the morning sleeping on the floor. In the morning, a policeman took me to the military hospital where I had to wear a robe and I was given something to eat – porridge with soup. On that day I had my checkup and I complained about the same sensations. I

was told to come again the next day for a follow up. After another consultation, it was said that I was not eligible for military service, category E. I believed that that everything I orchestrated and pretended did help me. When I asked to have my clothes back, the doctors had left already so I stayed there another night... The next day I saw two nurses sitting on a bench there and I told them about the missing cloths and that I did not get supper; they protested and said that they would complain and so it was – the sargent got a reprimand. It was assumed that he had been hoping I would give him a payment in exchange for the cloths. When I returned home, I learned that some of my friends received immediate release and some received a one-year deferral. However, others were drafted.

I resumed my regular activities, in the nest, in the KKL (Keren Kayemet L'Israel – JNF [Jewish National Fund]) and more. I went to conventions of Hashomer Hatzair. In Warsaw I first got to know Yaakov Hazan (one of the leaders of the youth movement, and later for long years a colleague of Meir Yaari in the Mapam political party). I also was exposed to Haim Nachman Byalik (the Israeli national poet, great artist and illustrator as well as active Zionist) who talked to the audience of our movement. I probably was the first son of our town who went to Warsaw. Immediately I bought the city map and traveled around, using the electric tram.

When I was 24 years old, I decided to get training for aliyah (hachsharah). The British, who ruled Palestine, were very careful to ensure that the young immigrants would have training for aliyah. I wanted to be someone special, to meet capable people. I petitioned the management of the movement in Lebov and got an answer saying that I was belonged to the Galician Hachsharah in Planty, a small place in north-east of Poland. I then used to paint on canvas without frames and sold them to the owners of the wood sawmills in the vicinity near the towns. In addition to me, one of the secreteries of our Hachsharah was later in Beit Alfa and the third one studies in the Technion of Haifa. I also served there as a medic who treated sick members. The Planty Kibbutz moved to another place – to the town of Slonim. I made an effort for Rosa to join us, but it was difficult to get work for a living in Planty. I stayed in Slonim for a half a year, where I worked as an artist of decorative art on pillows and home objects. I also renewed painting of bicycles. This earned a higher income than chopping trees or other difficult physical jobs. We had a patron who was a craftsman in fixing primuses [portable cooking stoves], bicycles and more. I was hired by him and I also worked in book and magazines binding. One of our group learned from me the skill of binding which paid off more.

When I returned home, the income situation was not good; Sol used to send us some dollars and also we got packages from him with used clothes. I myself dressed pretty nicely.

The activity in the nest diminished. Before my aliyah, I was called to act in the nest [in another place outside of Mlynov] and also to teach Hebrew there. I stayed there until I received the date for aliyah, and I began to get ready for it. Rosa made aliyah a year earlier because I was delayed by counseling in the Ken.

When the day of my aliyah drew closer, my parents' mood was depressed. Out of six children, five left home and one only – Hannah, who had not married yet – stayed home. In Lebov, I boarded the train towards Warsaw and met my friends there from the training (hachsharah). When we arrived at the port of Haifa, a representative of Kibbutz Merhavia took us to Tel Aviv. It was Purim and we visited the spectacular festive march of the Adloyada עדלאידע on the street there. The letter I sent home telling about that experience passed around.

I was used to working in agriculture, but I did not have any experience in sheep breeding. I started working with sheep after a year. I ordered professional books and magazines from Russia, where it was developed. I read and I learned autodidactically.