

A Town with Four Names: Recollections of life in Poland prior to World War II

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Brest (as the Russians call it) is a city with about 200,000 inhabitants, in the USSR on the Polish border. It is situated on the River Muchawiec as it runs into the River Bug and is on multiple railway crossings. It is located on the road between Moscow and Warsaw, and, as tourists often stop there before returning from Russia to Poland and Western Europe, it has in recent years been turned by the Russians into a show place, with large squares and imposing monuments to the heroes who fought the Germans in the nearby fortress one kilometre to the west, when the Germans invaded Russia in 1941. The commandant of the fortress happened to be a Jewish officer, who died valiantly in its defense after the German army advanced deep into Russian territory. These changes in the city's appearance must have taken place in the last twenty years, however, because when I visited London in 1965 I was repeatedly refused a visa of entry into Brest by the Russian Embassy on the grounds that Brest "was of no interest to tourists and had no accommodation for tourists."

Nevertheless, in September 1965, I did cross the Polish border in my little Fiat, carrying a permit to visit Minsk, and persuaded the officers at the border to allow me to spend the day there, on the grounds that I had been born and raised in Brest. Contrary to the information given me by the Russian Embassy in London, who told me that there was nothing to see there, since the old city had been "wiped out" by the shelling and bombing of World War II, I found the city almost intact; but it was a pathetic sight. The buildings were in a state of neglect; the shops were used for housing; and the once beautiful synagogue in the centre of the town was now shabby and used as a cinema. Trees lining many of the streets were overgrown and untrimmed, and hid the neglected little houses.



Former synagogue - now cinema
Click on photo to see enlarged copy

After photographing my old school, the synagogue (or rather cinema), and the old weatherboard house where I had spent my childhood and adolescence, I located a small, insignificant monument which had been erected by the Red troops after they reached Brest in 1944, to mark the spot where, two years before, nearly the entire

remaining Jewish population of about 30,000 had been shot and buried. Earlier, between 5,000 and 8,000 able-bodied men had already been taken outside the city, on the pretext of going to a work project, and murdered there. My family and I, through a set of peculiar circumstances, had emigrated just before the German invasion. If we had stayed, we would surely have joined all our friends in death.

Geographically, and historically, my birthplace is known as Brest-Litovsk, the name being indicative of its link with Lithuania. Although founded by the Slavs in 1017 and invaded by the Mongols in 1241, it became part of Lithuania in 1319. In 1569 it became the capital of a unified Polish-Lithuanian state.

The treaty between the Germans and the Russians towards the end of World War I was signed in 1918, and is recorded in history books and encyclopaedias as the "Treaty of Brest-Litovsk." This took place in the nearby fortress, which is surrounded by a mediaeval wall and moat. In 1936, I had an opportunity to visit the fortress with my school. It was pointed out to me that the Russian graffiti on the wall of the conference room stating "No Peace and No War," was attributed to Trotsky; it must have been scribbled during a moment of frustration, which peace negotiations can invoke. The city acquired its Polish name of Brzesc Nad Bugiem (the last two words, sometimes abbreviated N/B, mean "the River Bug") in the year I was born - that is, in 1921- and continued to be known by that name until 1939 and the outbreak of World War II.

Yet there is a fourth name by which the town is known - that of Brisk, a name dear to me and of great sentiment to the Jews who lived there for about six centuries. The origin of this Yiddish name is obscure to me, but I have always referred to the city as "Brisk" and have taken pride in being a "Brisker." The Jewish Brisk had had a great history, producing such famous rabbis as Solomon Luria and Joel Sirkes in earlier periods, three generations of the Soloveitchik family in more recent times (right up to the last war), Jacob Epstein the great Talmudist at the Hebrew University, Menachem Begin, and many other major religious, literary and political leaders.

The Landsmanshaften (immigrant clubs) in the Americas, Australia and Israel are called the Brisker Landsmanshaften, and an obscure little street in Tel Aviv, Rehov Brisk, has been named after it - a small tribute to an old Jewish community which provided so many personalities, Rabbis and Gaonim, and which is now extinct. It lives now only in memories. It was a cool September night in 1938. The sounds of the horse's hooves and the carriage's wheels echoed in the empty streets as our family left for the station with our meagre belongings. My heart was heavy. For the moment, the excitement and anticipation of going to a new exotic land which would offer me freedom and opportunity was forgotten. I was silently saying goodbye to every building, to every cobblestone in the street, and to my friends, who would be asleep by now, nearly midnight. I did not get the chance to say goodbye to most of my friends as, a week earlier, after a farewell party by the committee and members of "Masada," of which I had been secretary for nearly two years, I developed quinsy [tonsillitis] which subsided only on the eve of our departure. A few close friends had come earlier in the evening to say goodbye. The others were not aware of my illness, nor the exact day of our departure.

As, one after the other, the buildings and streets receded from view, I strained to have a last lingering look at the so familiar surroundings into which I was born and where I had spent the most formative and influential seventeen years of my life. When would I be able to visit my friends and see "my" Brisk again? Brisk was a town that I loved so dearly, regardless of its poverty and the bleak, uncertain future it offered me. Because of that uncertainty, my contemporaries and I were dedicated to finding a way to create a better future for ourselves and, in our young minds, we thought ourselves to be idealists. But, just as there is no pure altruism in this world, I believe there is no unmotivated idealism. Most of the youth in Brisk unwittingly became "idealists" because of that uncertainty about our future. To establish a future that held out something better than second-class citizenship and the increasing misery, nearly everyone belonged to some organisation, whether it was "Gordonia," "Betar," "Poale Zion," "Bund," "Mizrachi," "Masada," etc. The Communist sympathisers, and there were many of them, did not declare themselves openly. For that, they could easily end up in the nearby concentration camp: Bereza Kartusk.

In our quest for a better world of justice, freedom and tolerance, we thirsted for knowledge and education. I had formed strong bonds with many both from my own age group and among older folk, but on this particular September night I did not imagine that those bonds were about to be broken forever.



Brest Railway Station

The station of Brzesc N/B was brightly lit and as busy as usual, serving as an intersection for three different railway lines. Shortly after midnight we boarded the train for Warsaw. It was half empty, which was so different from only a short two months ago, in the summer of 1938, when the trains had been full. I had criss-crossed Poland that summer with the few zlotys I'd saved up from my earnings as a tutor in Latin. Most of my earnings went towards the cost of books and school fees, these being nominal as my school was a government school.

Soon after boarding the train, I left my parents and sister in their compartment and found myself a completely empty one, where I could stretch out and go to sleep. I wanted to arrive in Warsaw refreshed and thus to be able to revisit some of my favourite spots there the next day. The rhythm of the train sounds, the lateness of the hour, the tiredness and weakness following my recent fever, all these should have sent me off to sleep fairly quickly. But I couldn't sleep, and kept on dwelling upon the great new change in my life. The past few weeks had been hectic, although events had been set in

motion nearly a year before, when I manipulated my mother (my father would not hear of it) to lodge an application with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (H.I.A.S.) for a visa to Australia - a land familiar to me only through geography lessons and from a book by Jules Verne I'd read as a child. Now it all seemed like one of Jules Verne's adventures. I was trying hard to get to sleep, but even the rhythm of the steam train did not help. Past events passed through my mind like snippets from a movie, and our present long journey suddenly seemed unreal.

My paternal grandfather had migrated to the USA early this century, intending to save enough money there to be able to bring his wife and three children over. The Jewish population in Czarist Russia (as now in 'Free Poland') was poor, and he could not afford tickets for the whole family. By the time he had settled in and gained enough money, World War I had broken out.

My father was conscripted into the Russian Army and eventually ended up in Kiev and other cities on the Dnieper. My mother, his girlfriend at the time, followed him there and they eventually married in Yekatherinislav (or "Dniepropetrovsk," as it is now called), just after the Revolution, in 1917 or 1918.

In 1923, my grandmother and two aunts went to the USA to join grandfather; however, my father stayed on in Brzesc N/B In spite of the difficulties in making a living as a watchmaker (and a good watchmaker he was): in a town with a population of 60,000, there were about 20 watchmakers and few watches about. Yet he stayed on. We had the papers to migrate to the USA but, as time passed, their validity expired and with the onset of the Great Depression, entry to the USA became difficult. In our case, my father was determined to stay in Brisk, not because of the great love he had for Poland, but because of his involvement in numerous communal activities He was secretary of several organisations, such as the Handverker Ferein, a Jewish trade union, and secretary of Z.T.S., a local Jewish sports club. He was active in the leftist Poale Zion movement, Ort (a Jewish trade school), and so on. He enjoyed the prestige of his positions. He loved his activities in the Yiddish cultural circles of our town. Sadly, the family came last in his thoughts and plans. He certainly took very little interest in me. My mother had to work hard to supplement our meagre income (mostly consisting of gifts from the USA) with dressmaking, her customers being peasant girls from nearby villages, and with cooking meals for subtenants. She, too, had little time for me. Thus I learned early in life to be independent.

Poverty and "scraping for a living" were part of Jewish life in the smaller towns where no industries existed. But this got worse with the creation of the new Polish state, formed after a century and a half of foreign occupation. The new state was supposed to be democratic; but the rulers of Poland, like those of the other newly created states after World War I, had no conception of what democracy was, and they certainly had no intention of enforcing its principles as proposed by the Versailles Treaty and Woodrow Wilson. Jews were excluded completely from the entire civil service, and from transport and state-owned manufacturing monopolies. Already, in the early 1920s, the government resorted to etatism - a kind of state capitalism which nationalised the

tobacco, liquor, salt, timber, matches and other industries. These were industries which Jews had created and in which they had long been prominent. As the government took these over, the Jewish employees were dismissed.

In a town like Brest where there was practically no industry. The Jews, who made up 60% of its population of 60,000, had to rely on small trade and commerce. The local shops and tradesmen - tailors, bakers, butchers, shoemakers, photographers, etc. - supplied the peasants from nearby villages and the army and airforce, which were heavily concentrated about Brest. Brest was also the capital of the administrative district of Polesie, although located at its border. Consequently there were many Polish Catholic civil servants here, and a few of the Jewish shopkeepers and tradesmen were able to make a reasonable living.

Some Jews had small, back-yard factories, producing things like soap, cosmetics, sweets, and so on. The few professionals such as doctors and lawyers lived fairly well. They had running water, indoor toilets, radios and even telephones - all unattainable luxuries for more than 90% of the Jewish population before World War II.

There were, on the other hand, smaller shopkeepers and tradesmen who struggled to make ends meet. There were also many, many beggars existing on handouts. Things got worse when the global economic crisis set in, and those who relied on dollars sent by relatives in the USA suffered most. None of this, however, led to our journey. My father, like most others, accepted the status quo.

As far as I am concerned, the real process leading to our journey probably started years before, in my own hungers and longings. As a curious youngster and avid reader, I developed a thirst for knowledge and, subsequently, a desire to become a doctor. At the time, I did not realise that the motivation for this desire had deeper psychological roots. It appeared to be an unrealistic dream at the time, not only because I came from a poor home (that, perhaps, could be overcome), but because of the existing numerus clausus (Jewish quotas) at the government high schools and universities. There were three private high schools in our town, but they were beyond my means. The government high school was supposedly free, save for a nominal half-yearly fee. This school accepted about two Jewish youngsters per class (of 40) - this was in a city with a 60% Jewish population! The situation was even more paradoxical, because only a wealthy Jewish child whose parents could bribe the teachers had some chance of getting into this "free" government school.

Sheer persistence won out. Knowing that I could not afford a private school, I sat three times for the entrance exams for the government high school and was failed twice. By the third time, they had become exasperated with my perseverance and allowed me to enter. I learned this later from my Latin teacher. Somehow I had become expert in Latin, and I was her favourite. One day, she said: "My, how the years have flown! Here you are going for your matric already. It was only a few years ago when the priest (Catholic religion teacher), during the pedagogic conference selecting entrants to the school,

insisted that: "If we don't let this little Jew enter, he will return for the fourth and fifth time for his entrance exams."

There were two Jewish boys in our class. I was accepted by my classmates and experienced no anti-Semitism. Coming from an atheistic background, I adjusted easily to the Gentile environment. Neither of my parents were religious Jews. They were Bund sympathisers, although my father was active in the leftist Poale Zion. I had read a lot of Yiddish literature in my childhood, but I knew no Hebrew and little of the Jewish religious laws. My upbringing had been in Yiddish, but had excluded the Jewish traditions. Most of my teenage years, from the age of 12 to 17, were spent amongst Polish Gentiles. My language at home slowly changed from Yiddish to Polish, but I never drifted towards assimilation. I have always been proud, and shall remain proud, of my Jewish heritage. This pride I owe largely to my city, Brisk. It was an entirely Jewish city, the Gentiles living in the suburbs, particularly in the newly built suburb called "Clerical." The school provided time for Jewish history lessons once a week, where all the Jewish boys from our school, and later also the girls when our school became co-educational, turned up voluntarily. It aroused my curiosity about my religion, which was not practised at my home.

At the age of 15, using my own earnings as a tutor in Latin, I hired a melamed (Hebrew teacher), who taught me how to lay tefillim and who introduced me to the Hebrew prayer books. When, after some months, I could no longer afford the private religious lessons, this melamed, who lived in extreme poverty with many children to support, offered to give me free lessons. I declined, because at the time I had thrown myself into other activities. But I never forgot this gentle, saintly melamed's gesture. Somehow I recalled him on the memorable September night of 1938 when I left Brisk. I hoped that one day I would be able to return to visit Brisk as a man of means and could reward this man and others who had been kind to me. There were many "beautiful" people in my town, people dedicated to their faith, honourable people, notwithstanding their miserable circumstances. Thus, at the age of 15, I had mixed emotions about my national Jewish background and the land in which I had grown up, a land I had learned to love through the influence of the Polish school and the national romantic Polish literature. By this stage of my young life, I had absorbed nearly all the fervently nationalistic writing of nineteenth and twentieth century Poland.

The 1930s were in particular a time when there was a tendency for writers in the newly created eastern European states to glorify their histories and to romanticise their national heritage and their countryside. This spurred me into travelling and exploring as much of Poland as I could during school holidays, despite my limited financial resources. Drawn though I was to Polish nationalism, like the few other Jewish boys in my school I felt that to deny my Jewish origins would have meant to be a renegade.

During the next couple of years, several things took place that changed my outlook. The death of Marshall Pilsudski in May 1935, a man who had been a benevolent dictator and who was opposed to official anti-Semitic policies, was a turning point for Polish Jewry, and for me specifically. In actuality, Pilsudski did not particularly care for Jews,

but he recognised their potential contribution to Poland, and therefore, did not adopt an official anti-Semitic platform. Like many other Jews, I admired the "Grand-dad" as he was affectionately known. I thought of him as an upright tower of strength in a government which otherwise tended to be corrupt. Jews genuinely mourned his death. When, towards the end of 1936, Rydz-Smigly took over, the stability of the Polish government had already weakened and corruption had increased. Economic conditions worsened. Anti-Semitic legislation was being passed through the Sejm (Parliament). The Jews, who had already been legislated out of certain industries, were now legislated out of the professions. Numerus clausus became numerus nullus. It became obvious that medicine would be closed to me. Anti-Semitic slogans and anti-Semitic articles crept into the press; boycotting of Jewish merchants and tradesmen was repeatedly called for; some of my Polish school friends became members of the party, Mloda Polska (Young Poland), a similar body to that of the Hitler Youth. We became estranged.

It was early in 1937 that I went to a meeting of a Jewish students' organisation called "Masada." A fellow from a different school, whom I was tutoring in Latin, talked me into attending this meeting. There were about a dozen members present. The meeting was addressed by a lawyer from Warsaw, who had come to visit his parents in Brisk, and who, I later learned, had graduated from the same Polish high school that I had attended some seven or eight years earlier. He was known to be second only to Jabotinsky in his powers of oratory. I was curious to see if he would live up to his reputation.

I was not disappointed. Menahem Begin was indeed an excellent orator and, though the auditorium was small, he spoke with pathos and enthusiasm. The subject was not new: the hopelessness of our future in Poland, and the urgent need of our own State in Palestine. He spoke in Polish, but would use some clichés in Yiddish or German. I became interested and joined the "Masada," a student wing of the Revisionist Party. I was asked to contribute to its magazine, also called "Masada." I wrote about my dilemma, that of a Jewish boy in a Polish environment trying to find his identity. My article, simple but genuine, impressed the leader of the group and I was asked to become its secretary. I was flattered and I needed this. I threw myself into the party's activities with great enthusiasm. I read all I could about Zionism, and was particularly impressed with Jabotinsky's report to the Peel Royal Commission. There was a man with practical answers to our problems, not just theories and weak aspirations. I worked hard for the organisation. As a result, my school marks suffered, but I found myself fulfilled. By mid-1938, the membership of Masada had increased ten-fold to about 200.

As I became imbued with Zionism and Jewish nationalism, and disenchanted with my "fatherland," Poland, I developed the desire to migrate and settle in Palestine. There were, however, two problems: first, certificates of entry into Palestine were almost impossible to obtain at the time, and second, there was no medical school there, as far as I knew, and I still felt that I was destined for the medical profession.

On the 13th May, 1937 - by some weird coincidence, it was the second anniversary of Pilsudski's death - something else happened to affect my outlook.

One of the anti-Semitic laws introduced in the past year or so was a restriction on the number of cattle which the Jews could kill ritually - a sort of numerus clausus on cows. The number was not sufficient to cater for the needs of the Jewish community, which was more than 80% orthodox. As a result, much illegal killing of animals was carried out by the local butchers. Naturally, the police had to be bribed. On that particular May morning, a government officer assisted by a constable carried out an inspection of the meat market. In one butcher shop, a quantity of meat above the allotted quota was found and was confiscated by the officer. When the middle-aged butcher protested that he had paid off this particular constable, the constable feigned indignation in front of the government inspector, lashed out "You lying, bloody Jew," and pushed the butcher, who stumbled and fell. The butcher's hot-headed son, seeing his father injured, stabbed the policeman, who subsequently died. A pogrom spread immediately throughout Brisk, and raged right on through the night. It was not a spontaneous riot. It was too well organised to be so. At the time, there were agitators from the north of Poland (from the Poznan district) who had been planning for just such an opportunity. Until then, their propaganda calling for a boycott of Jewish tradesmen and shopkeepers had not been very effective. But on this day in May, 1937, they had collected an army of nearby peasants and hooligans, who looted every Jewish shop in town, while the police stood by to protect them. Any resistance offered by Jews was frustrated and stopped by the police with drawn guns. The pogrom only ended the next morning, when auxiliary police arrived from Warsaw. Witnessing all this was a traumatic experience and it remained vividly in my mind. Until then, 'boycott' and 'pogrom' had just been words to me.

The general idea of the pogrom was that, with their shops empty, the Jews would not be able to replace their stock quickly and therefore would not be able to carry on with their trade. This would provide an opportunity for the few existing Polish shopkeepers, merchants and tradesmen to take over. The plan failed. All Polish Jewry rallied and helped replenish the shops within a few days, and trade went on as usual. The solidarity of the Jews from other cities was just magnificent.

At about the same time in 1937, there were several other pogroms in Poland, but not on such a large scale as that in Brisk. The clouds over the Polish Jewish community were getting thicker, and the gloom deepened in the following year.

The impact of the pogrom was reflected in the numerous applications that the local H.I.A.S. office received from Jews wanting to emigrate. The only country which had its gates open at the time - the world was starting to recover from the Great Depression, and no-one was keen on receiving immigrants - was Australia. Even this was mainly for German refugees from Nazism; but Australia, which had been very hard hit by the Great Depression, must have had a quota of the numbers she could receive. Although hundreds of Jews applied, only about twenty families from Brisk were given visas. We were fortunate to be amongst them. There was one catch though. Immigrants had to have 200 Pounds Sterling, to show that they could support themselves for a while on

arrival in Australia. 200 Pounds Sterling was a fortune in 1938, and our family did not even have a small fraction of that sum in cash. Our immigration permit arrived on the first of August, 1938, my seventeenth birthday. It was a hot summer day and I was jubilant. I knew that, in Australia, I would be able to study medicine and, later after graduation, immigrate to Palestine. But my father would not have a bar of it, and besides, we did not have the two hundred pounds nor the fare. No matter how hard we try to guide our lives or "forge our futures," no matter how determined we may be, we can fail. It is said, "where there's a will, there's a way"; perhaps yes, but not always.

I have seen some strange coincidences in my life. The one that occurred in September 1938 was one of them. It was not possible for me to go to Australia on my own, but then the following happened: in the beginning of September 1938 Hitler marched into the occupied Sudeten, the western part of Czechoslovakia. This was a signal for Poland to demand the Cieszyn area, a part of Czechoslovakia which was ethnically Polish. The Czechs refused, however. The Polish government responded by declaring a general mobilisation and threatening to take the disputed area by force. There were massive rallies all over Poland, with slogans - Na Prage ("On to Prague") - calling for a full invasion of Czechoslovakia.

My father had never been a great hero and certainly not a Polish patriot. In his forties, he was still of military age. And we did have papers to go to Australia.

Things happened very swiftly. It took less than one week to sell our house, which we owned, and this provided us with the money for our fares and our deposit for entry into Australia. A few days later, Czechoslovakia capitulated and, for the sake of peace, handed over the small disputed area of land to Poland. But by this time, our house was sold and the ship tickets paid for. There was no backing away for my family. Now this long journey to the other side of the world was ahead of us. I nodded off to sleep eventually, and awakened when the train pulled up in Warsaw in the morning.

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