

Memories of Skępe - An Interview with Stanisława Nadrowska

Translation by Sławek Witkowski; Edited by Michael Smith

While in Skępe we had the opportunity to talk by phone with the sister of Zyta Wegner, Stanisława (nee Nadrowska), who was born in the early 1920's and remembered many of my relatives. Stanisława graciously agreed to sit down for an extended interview with our translator, Sławek Witkowski. The following excerpts were taken from the interview during the summer of 2014.

The interview concentrates on the pre-war period and includes an over-all picture of Skępe, the town and its people. Of particular interest were her memories of the Jews of Skępe and the stories of Jewish life.

Stanisława remembers the Fairs of Skępe:

Every Wednesday of the week a fair was held at Rynek (Rynek is the town square which today has benches, art work depicting the Skępe of the past, and parking slots and a bus stop). "Many people who attended the fair came from the surrounding area (for example from the town of Sierpc). Jews also took an active part in the fair. I remember that some kids tried to create mischief for the Jews when they put up their barrels at Rynek, however the Skępe residents would not allow them to do it. The children were often scolded not to do it."

"In addition to the fair on Rynek, on Sierpecka Street which extends east from Rynek there was a cattle fair where farmers would bring horses, cows, and pigs. After the fair the farmers exported all the animals to Germany. I remember that farmers with geese went along our roads to Włocławek. There was also the so-called kurzni fair held in the same location where the Church stands at the end of the Dobrzyńska street. During this fair people offered eggs, butter, etc. Such products as clothes and shoes came from Łódź and were offered at Rynek. There were also butchers with their stalls, the same as used nowadays at fairs. That made it possible for people to sit down and eat sausages. Tea was prepared in samovars. These same fairs were already being held during World War I. All this commerce took place on Wednesdays. In general, trade and crafts were well developed in Skępe, whereas agriculture was not, because the lands in Skępe were of poor quality."

Information concerning Jews:

"Before the war, my dad lived in a house at 7 Rynek street. Around the square were shops. They were stores of both Poles and Jews. Across from our house, on the corner of

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the Dobrzyńska and Rynek streets was a bakery which belonged to a Jewish family - Adler. There was a very nice woman who worked there, her name was Witla. My mom

always wanted us to go there to buy bread rolls. If we bought 10 bread rolls Witla always gave us 11 rolls (my mother boarded employees, so a lot of bread was consumed). I remember that she always carried them in a basket."

"Jewish stores were also behind us from the side of Rynek. There was a Jew named Winkelman who had a textile store with very expensive and high-quality materials. He had a family, I think it was his sister, but I do not know because I was a little girl and I wasn't interested in it and did not ask him. Her husband's name was Kurczak. He was a tailor and had three daughters. We used to have fun together at Rynek. The textile store was located downstairs and the tailor's shop in which the tailor sewed these materials was upstairs. This was a family business. There were also houses located from the Dobrzyńska street to Piaski street (today all of them are still standing). Right next to us lived a Jew (but later on we moved out) - he was the owner of one of the houses - his name was Pozmanter. He offered haberdashery and china."

Stanisława recalls that "on one street corner (this house stands to this day) there was a two-storied tenement house. Jews lived on the top floor (she mentions here her friend Raszka) and downstairs there was another shop with household appliances owned by another member of the Adler family." After long reflection, she remembers that "upstairs lived the Rywanowiczs who lived on one side and Adler who lived on the other side and had a shop downstairs. Under the Rywanowiczs there was Spółdzielnia Spożywców Społem. The Rywanowiczs were a large family with many children. The father of this family was involved in the trade of crops in the grain market (in Skępe there were several markets and each had a different name). He earned a lot of money from the trade in grain crops."

Stanisława was a very good friend of their daughter, whose name was Raszka. She was a blonde with very thick hair. She says that she "attended the same lower secondary school in Lipno with Raszka. One of our teachers was a Jew (German teacher). He favored Raszka a little bit." She said that if she "remembers well, Raszka's father had a second wife because his first wife died. Raszka wrote to me from the ghetto. In her letter she asked me to go to the Grodecki family on Sierpecka street and take all the belongings they left, but I did not go because I was afraid they'd think that I want to take them for myself. I'm sure they wouldn't give them to me though."

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"There was also a Jew who lived in front of us. His house was next door to the house of my uncle. He was a butcher and sold beef and all the kinds of meat Jews can eat. I think he had a daughter and a son. They can be described as very calm and nice people. His children were older than me. We used to play and have fun together."

" I also remember another Jew who was a butcher and sold only beef and mutton. His name was Gutman. He had a shop at Rynek. He lived with us in the "out house", a house in the yard, along with his wife and two children. Shortly before the war his wife delivered a son and they were very happy because of that. It was a respectable and honest family. My mother used to catch a cold very often. This lady came to my mother and offered cupping therapy. She also used oils for massage. My parents were friends with the family and lived with them in a very good relationship."

"On the other side of the house lived a Jewish woman who was retired (I don't remember her name). Her daughters lived in America but cared for her mother very much. They rented an apartment here in Skępe for her. There was a time when they came to visit her, just before the war, and were very happy that their mother's house window overlooked our garden which belonged to my parents. The garden was very beautiful. I remember that there was a fence around the garden. There was also a Jew, Podrygał, who lived behind our house. He had many children, especially the girls (he also had boys but I remember girls only). We went to the same school. We always played together. We also went to their yard to have fun. I also remember that when Ms. Podrygał baked passover bread she always treated us to it. She was that kind of woman who always gave something when children looked. This is the family from which one teenaged girl escaped from the ghetto.

(An account of events from the book by Zyta Wegner regarding the war). "She knocked on our house door. She had managed to dig a tunnel under the foundation and got out of the ghetto. She described to us the horrible conditions in the ghetto and the prevailing famine. She was hungry and had lice in her hair. She came from Warsaw to ask for food for her family. After a night's sleep in our house she took, as directed by her mother, food in the form of mixed peas and porridge and bread hidden in it. It was all wrapped in a rag bag. She was certain that nobody would take it from her. My father went out in the morning with her and walked to the train so that no one could see that they know each other – they walked at a certain distance from each other so as not to attract attention. And then any trace of her was lost. For many years we hadn't heard from the family until the eighties when Naomi Wasserman of Jerusalem, the daughter of Podrygał, the baker, visited us. This was the only woman who survived the war. She came to Poland for a trip with four children to see Oświęcim, which became a graveyard for her family. She was

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very touched when, after so many years, she entered the home of her parents. She was crying loudly when she was listing the names of all her family members. She also mentioned the period of childhood with our sister Irena. In the house where they lived there was nothing they had left behind. Stanisława mentions also another Jew, Nusbaum, who was a tailor. He sewed hats. His son fell in love with and married a Polish woman. They lived here after the war and probably their children still live here in Skępe. She was the daughter of a midwife. Jews were not happy because of that because such a marriage meant professing Christianity. Despite this fact that he married a Polish woman they were treated like Jews when the Germans came. At this time the whole family hid themselves.

"In Polish schools before the war (primary schools, lower secondary schools or high schools) there was always a prayer. Children stood and said a prayer. I remember that Jewish children did not go out in this time. They stood with us but didn't pray. They behaved with dignity while others were saying a prayer. After saying the prayer classes began. Due to the fact that I was friends with Raszka and when I had some problems with mathematics, I remember I came to Raszka and asked her to check the tasks and exercises that I performed. In the lower secondary school it was said that if someone didn't want to stay at a class when saying a prayer, then they could go out. However, no one had anything against it. Jews and Poles played together.

"In addition to above-mentioned families, there were also Jewish families who were poorer than those described. Children from such families were moved to richer families who had better accommodation, conditions, etc. The children ate food there for, for instance, one month. I remember that when I once visited Raszka I saw a boy who was a Jew and who did not belong to her family. I asked her why he was there eating dinner. She then explained to me that this was the way they helped each other. And so for a month the boy ate food with them at the table. Then he could be taken to another family and eat there, etc. Children could stay longer than a month but it required an explicit consent. The Jews helped each other and did not leave any of their member without any help (aid).

In addition to Jews I also remember Germans. There was, for example, a German who was a barber. He had a daughter. When it comes to his appearance, his distinguishing feature was one artificial eye. He offered cupping therapy and did injections. This can be strange but a barber was also engaged in doing such things. Then, there was a house of the German, Edward Dazy. There was a shop, which belonged to a Jew, in this house. It was a grocery store, which was most often visited by Jews due to the fact that they really

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supported each other. Unfortunately, I don't remember the Jew's surname but it began with the letter "N". Then, there was a Polish shop, delicatessen. The goods for shops (for example, oranges, halva, chocolate, etc.) were delivered from Warsaw because it was quite close. There was a gas station, whose owner was Dazy. He was our neighbour from the side of the garden and we were also friends. We lived in perfect harmony both with Jews as well as Germans.

"I still remember the wife of the sawmill manager. Her husband was manager but the sawmill belonged to the heir Zielinski. Poles worked there but their manager was Jewish. They had a daughter who was probably 15 years old. She already thought about a "wedding starter kit". She found ladies who sewed underwear for her daughter and embroidered night shirts and pillowcases. A long time ago it was not possible to buy such things as you can do today. We needed to sew clothes. She showed that all to our mom and she was very happy with all the stuff.

"My father was a shoemaker, he had a title of master, and was a vocational education teacher (he had the right to teach pupils in terms of a given profession). He had his own workshop and employed eight employees. He manufactured mainly high-quality leather women's shoes. He was a very outgoing and kind person, and everyone liked him. He told me that when he was in Warsaw he told a group of Jewish shoe top makers (persons who prepare the top of the shoe) about Skępe. When they heard the story they said if Skępe was so beautiful then they would need to come there one day. My dad invited them and they came by train which travelled on the route Warsaw-Kołobrzeg. It was Easter time when they visited. Due to the fact that my parents had enough money they could offer old-Polish style ham on the bone. And when those young Jews sat down they asked my father to close the door with a key and they started tasting the ham. They didn't want to be seen by anyone. My father didn't persuade them to eat it. It was their will. So my father didn't oppose. They said it was very tasty and that they had never eaten such tasty food."

When it comes to important places for Jews, Stanisława remembers that "at 14 Dobrzyńska street in front of the school there was the synagogue. The mikvah was located at the bottom (downstairs). It was used by both women and men. It isn't true that it was intended for women only. Maybe they had a certain ritual during which women could only use the mikvah, but it was not designed just for them. Men could also use it. Stanisława says that her father employed men and that they knew Jews very well, so if they wanted they could have a bath in the mikvah for a few pennies between

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Saturday and Sunday. However, to get such a privilege to use it one must have connections."

As for Jewish religious practices, Stanisława remembers that "those Jews who lived in the 'out house' with us (Gutmans), during the Great Night, built a wooden tent called a "kuczka" (Sukkah). Wooden boards were then covered with sheets to resemble walls. There was also a wooden table. They ate in the tents, not at home. I do not know what was the name of the holiday. During Jewish holidays nobody bothered them. I think that if we went there we would be welcome but no one really wanted to bother them. I didn't go there.

"I also remember the Jewish wedding. I took part in one Jewish wedding. It was a wedding of the daughter of Goldman, the owner of the dry-goods store, with a brother of my friend Raszka (Rywanowicz). The wedding took place at Rynek. The bride was dressed in a white wedding dress. All Jews participated in this event. They had a custom to break a glass – it was a sign of happiness. People were dancing, singing, and having a lot of fun. A Jewish man danced with a Jewish man, and Jewish women danced with Jewish women – separately. I also remember the Jewish Cemetery. I used to go there. I attended funerals. Jews were wrapped in sheets. They were carried on piles. I do not remember any building at the Jewish cemetery. There were only monuments. I think that the remaining foundation is a part of a grave, not a building."

An interesting story related to the family of Stanisława and Zyta with the Podrygał's was the story of a goat. "In the houses there were no refrigerators, but in almost every house in Skępe there was a goat. Zyta says that her sisters also had a small goat, with which they always had fun. As I mentioned, next to them lived Podrygał, the baker. When one of the sisters went to the neighbors house the goat followed her. The baker put the bread outside on long boards to dry it. And what happened? The goat "went on" the bread. Mr. Podrygał came to our dad and showed him what the goat had done with all the loaves of bread. My dad told him not to be angry about the bread. He told him to prepare the bread and he would pay for all of them and take them. He said that those pieces of bread damaged by the goat would be cut off and given to hens and the remaining ones would be taken by him. There was also a situation when the goat did something wrong again and Mr. Podrygał locked the goat in a little wooden "stable". Those guys who worked in Podrygał's took these boards and the goat left. Mr. Podrygał did not know about it and when he came back there was no goat. He was so surprised that he come straight to my dad (Zyta's and Stanisława's dad) and told him that this goat was a devil because the lock was closed but there was no goat."

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War Comes to Skępe

"My dad fought in the war in 1918. He knew very well what war looked like, but, as you know, World War II was quite different. He bought boards from the sawmill and built a special shelter in the garden behind our house. This shelter had a special entrance. He thought that the children could be protected in the shelter against bullets (I was 17 years old then and Zyta wasn't born yet). It was quite far away from the street. But it turned out that the Germans were going to Warsaw at that time and there was no bypass around Skępe, therefore they traveled down Sierpecka street. My dad decided that the shelter would not protect us and decided that we had to escape. Perhaps families which didn't have small children stayed in Skępe, but I'm not one hundred percent sure. When Germans travelled to Warsaw they did not care if there was someone on the street or someone tried to get to the other side of the street - they would run over them."

"People knew there was going to be an outbreak of war. People heard about this because they had radio and newspapers. People were informed about war in different ways. We were ready for the war. In high schools different preparations were presented and taken. What is more, we all had masks in our school bags with salt liquid and pepper spray. The young were prepared by teachers at schools for the war."

"During this period Poland was developing. For example, Gdynia had been built for 20 years since World War I. I remember what Gdynia looked like before. People worked honestly, not like today. The shoe maker who lived near us said that Russians were about to enter our town and we would have to wear a red cap. He thought that they would be friendly for us but we knew Russians would not be friends for us.

"Jews knew that they would be taken first. It was announced. The lady who lived with her family with us (they had a shop with meat in Skępe) told my mom that she would like to leave her son, Mendelek with her, because they would die. They were aware of this. I was reading newspapers and there was information that Jews were persecuted in Germany. She wanted us to bring her child up. My mom agreed and said she would hide him from Germans. The child (Mendelek) played with Zyta. However, after some time the woman came back and took Mendelek with her. She said that she could not leave him with us. She decided that she would take him because she wanted to be with him even if

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they were to be killed – but together. When they were taken by Germans their apartment was immediately sealed by Germans.”

“I know that in the countryside near Skępe there was a Pole who managed to hide a Jewish child and survived the war. And the mother of the Jewish child came to the Pole after the war and took the child with her. There were many families who helped Jews in this manner. Poles were responsible for the children and their education. People helped each other. The whole world knew about the war. What is more, I think that Jews knew about it better than we Poles. They had families everywhere and communicated with them. Jews were taken from Skępe. They had no chance to escape. You had to be rich and clever to manage to escape. I do not know if and where Jews escaped, if any. I was not interested in that and I did not go to them and ask. If someone was rich, he or she escaped in disguise. In the U.S. there is a Jewish area - there were a lot of Jews who managed to escape. However, they escaped before the war. I did not hear about it that Jews escaped to Dobrzyń nad Wisłą. Even if they did, it did not make sense because Dobrzyń nad Wisłą was not separated from Poland. Was Dobrzyń nad Wisłą a different country? Obviously not. Why would they go there if Germans were able to find Jews everywhere? None of the Jews after the war returned to their home.”

“Germans had their own estate, Łąkie, in Skępe. Mr. Dazy had a gas station. There were no Russians and Lithuanians in Skępe. At least I don't know if they lived here in Skępe. A teacher in high school was an Ukrainian.

“Jews were very good friends with Poles. There was not hatred. They always had a clean house. I remember that we were always told to eat in the yard so as not to leave crumbs, scraps, etc at home. Jews and Poles came together for all state ceremonies, festivals, and different events. They walked in pairs for academies – they were treated the same way at school as Poles, and had Polish citizenship as well.

Stanisława remembers my great-grandmother, Feige Zamoskiewicz (nee Gutman), who lived at Rynek. Their house is marked on the pictures provided by Zyta. Gutman's house is highlighted with number 5. Unfortunately, Stanisława doesn't remember people in the pictures. Too many years have passed by. What she remembers best are the Podrygał's because they lived close to her.