

Letter from Bencjon Drutin, one of the people saved by the Grzesiuk family from Chełm (see: the account of Adela Grzesiuk-Dąbska and her son Jan Dąbski); no editorial changes;

Bencjan Drutin's letter, April, 2008

In the beginning of 1943, my parents discovered that there will be action taken [against the ghetto dwellers]v We saw Ukrainians and Germans entering the ghetto so my parents, my younger brother and I escaped from the ghetto to the Grzesiuk's. Feliks Grzesiuk was a friend of my father. Mr. Feliks told my father that if there's a need, he would help us, and so we stayed in his cellar, which was very dangerous because it was opposite the barracks.

We stayed with that wonderful family almost two years and we were saved - our mother Rachela, Brother and me. Father hid somewhere else - but was caught and murdered by the Germans. The Grzesiuk Family, Feliks and his wife and kids - one son was held captive in Germany - the son served in Junki - and their daughter, 17 years old, who helped us the most. She brought us water and food and took away our toilet-bucket and such. There was also a 7 year old daughter. Mr. Feliks was handicapped, he had served in the Russian army in the times of the Tsar and to escape from that service, he shot himself in one finger. They lived not far away from Moscow that time and after the First World War, they settled down in Poland, in Chełm. They were very poor. We weren't rich either, but during the first period, mother paid for us, but it only lasted a bit more than half a year. They [the Grzesiuk Family] shared [with us] everything they had.

Mrs. Adela received the "Righteous Among the Nations" medal during an assembly in Israel for her and her parents. I remember how her mother was so very afraid as nobody knew whether and when the Germans would lose the war and they were so scared that the Germans would find out who they've been hiding and kill us and them.

The Red Army drove back the Germans at the end of 1944. We survived in Chełm, me - 12 years old, my brother 5 years old and my mother - 34 years old - and about 18-20 Jews who worked in the Ghetto and the Germans hadn't yet killed. In Chełm, there once lived about 20000 Jews and about the same number of Poles.

CHEŁM

Adela Grzesiuk - Dąbska, 1927

My name is Adela Grzesiuk-Dąbska. I was born in Chełm, on May 4, 1927. I lived at 140 Lubelska Street, in our old family home. My father, Feliks Grzesiuk, and mother, Aniela Grzesiuk, settled there in 1926.

After the First World War, my father who was elsewhere, came back to Poland. Before the war, there was no jobs here. He met my mother, got married and wrote to some Jew from Petersburg, because Petersburg was the capital, not Moscow [nor Warsaw] at that time, that he didn't have a job and didn't know what to do. And this man wrote: "Come to me, I will give you a recommendation, and you'll go to Siberia, to the woods. I will come to you in season, for the hunting." Father spent eleven years there. He went to war from this place, he came back to Chełm, he spent a year in hospital, and for a year and a half after that, he was unwell. Any Poles who could, left Russia in 1918, he left in 1922 and was in the war. He had a military pension, but he also ran a liquor store. I had three brothers and a sister who was younger than me. Before the Second World War, my first brother was, for seven years, in a military band, the other was in a technical college. Once the war broke out in 1939, he couldn't learn any longer. Come the occupation, we got a notification from the Gestapo that he should turn up in their offices at a given time and day. We didn't know what this was about, but our mother was very clever, she went to a professor: "Professor, please advise me where I can find out what will happen to my children?" He said: "I will come to you, I'll tell you." We lived in harmony with this man as we were good students. In fact, he came in that evening. "They will take them to clear away snow." It was snowing day and night that winter. The snow was so deep going down the sidewalks was like going through a tunnel; to the shop, to the house, everywhere. And the young people had to shovel the snow off the road. A baker was walking down this road, when he saw them: "What are you doing?", he said to my brother. And he said: "Mr. Celiński, they called us out, I have to do it." And the baker said: "Come to me in the afternoon, I will give you a certificate, I'll exempt you. You won't have to work." When someone had connections, they helped other people, not everybody was bad. Later, during the Occupation. I too went to work. I was thirteen years old. No-one's height or age was important, and certificates were not important then.

A Big Town [Chełm]

All the tenements leading from the cathedral, on the right, were Jewish buildings, luxurious buildings. They had shops. They had select goods. Jews weren't lazy, and they never offended anyone. They were always kind. One couldn't ever see a drunk Jew. I never saw them drinking vodka, and I visited them often, because this was my backyard. My neighbor's father was a Hussite, that is, he was an atheist. He was an old man. During the war, the Jews sewed uniforms, from the early morning to the evening. One day, I was coming home from school, one of them was outside their shop and said: "Do you know what your mother is cooking today?" "I don't know, I haven't asked yet." And he said: "Go and ask." I went and asked: "Mum, what have you got to eat today? What are you baking?" "Nothing. I have another dinner to cook today. Tell them to come. They will send a boy, it is not appropriate for them to go to the butcher's. That's the Jews' faith. They obeyed it. He will go and buy two or two and a half kilos of pork loin, he will bring it". Mother would clean it, season it, bake with sauce; I would knock it out of the pan, take it out so that it could get cool, and they will eat it; because my father will bring soup. We didn't quarrel, we lived in harmony, there were no rows at all. In our part of the town, there were doctors and dentists. Rubinsztajn ran a stationery shop at the corner. Polish mills were there. But Jews sold the flour.

Holidays

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, it was the feast of matzo. These cakes were thin; they looked like

wafers. They used to bring me these cakes. Mother said: "You won't eat anything today, right? Only this matzo, it's so tasty." It tasted like a cream slice, it was so thin. People said: "They killed a Pole, they make matzo from blood." What does a cake have in common with blood?

The war

In 1939, people ran away from the Germans, day and night. And the Russians destroyed a lot. September 8; the first air raid, people... There was a church fair on the hill, a lot of people came to pray. They killed 40 people. Stupid...

When the war broke out, recruitment into the armed forces started. A man from Poznań came, and they said: "Hit the Jew", such instigations began.

Belgium, Holland, France. Our soldiers had stars on arms, the others [the Jews] had them on the back, right behind the collar. They were elegantly dressed, they didn't carry anything with them, because they were told that they were going to a sanitarium, that they didn't need anything, that everything would be in the carriages they would travel in. But they didn't send carriages for them, they directed them somewhere else to box-cars. It was 4 o'clock, the dusk was falling. By the time they reached the wood, it had grown dark; and they had a long way to go, Sobibór was far away. Those who lived by the road watched them. They [Jews] threw gold into beets, into the potatoes, into the ditches. And they started an uprising in Sobibór. The hairdresser cut an SS man's head away with a straight razor.

Father and mother said: "Today is the last day that they will take them to the camp." Some old people were killed here. It's so unpleasant, when they lead them away... I always went shopping there [to a shop owned by a Jew]... he was walking, his wife, daughter, grandson, and behind them Fiszer, with his son-in-law and the rest of the workers, he looked after my parent's garden. They were about to kill the remaining people. A German said: "We should kill them here. We don't have to take them to the camp. They should die." I was just back from work, I saw them leading them from Szpitalna Street. Fiszer took his hat off: "Goodbye Adela." "Goodbye friend." At the very end of this column, young people were led in groups of eight. They always led them around 4 o'clock, so that they couldn't figure out where they were led. But they suspected something. They led them at 4 o'clock, even those from the other countries, they led them to the crossroads and to the road leading to Włodawa.

Jews

Gipsz. They had a shop here. They took everybody to the ghetto. Pocztowa Street and a few other streets. They had them there. They didn't take everyone to the camp. They made young people work. They built a few barracks and kept them there. They could walk. They came to us.

Rachela Gipsz, it was like that. A beautiful day. I came back, father looked at me, he didn't say anything. I said: "What's the matter dad?" "I'll tell you later." Gipsz hid. He said goodbye: "I can't watch my children suffering." He left her [Mrs. Gipsz] with the children. I didn't see her for the whole week. When mother bought something, she also bought for her. "Take it, for the children, use it to make some food." She had such character. I have her photo somewhere, with her children, in a summer dress. She came here with her children in 1942, in summer.

Her father had farmland and a mill. Here, in Nowosiulki and a saloon. They came, they hanged him in his mill. And later, they organized a camp right at this place. Szymel, he sold beef, said he had a good life, he ate what the Germans ate, he had a job, he threw corpses out of the ghetto. "I don't know how long will I live, but when I've got free time, when I have done my job, I think about you. I see your faces." Father said: "Mrs. Gipsz, we live on the front, we live in a dangerous place. What

shall I do?" And Mrs. Gipsz said: "Give me poison." "I won't give you poison. I'm a military man! I cannot give you that!"

Father looked at mother, mother looked at him, they went to the cellar. The cellar was big and dry. They stayed at our place for three years. We cooked what we could. Mother washed bedding. The worst was with washing children's clothes because we didn't have small children. People who walked around our house, could see. They tried to hide everything. Nobody knew everything, even I. In the cellar, there was a small window for coal, we opened it and tipped coal into the cellar.

Sometimes they stayed in the attic. When we could, we washed underwear and hung it out so that they had some air. The cellar was damp. My sister was silly, she didn't know that they stayed at our place. Mother gave food. Father carried out a bucket, they used as a toilet in the morning. I would quietly walk down to meet with them. One couldn't talk there because the Germans were our neighbors. They talked quietly, whispering in each other's ears. There was a bed, feather quilt and a pillow.

Moments of danger

The window was glazed. One time, a Gestapo officer stood at the window with his dog. The dog was sniffing, Bencjon Drutin was standing in front of the window at that moment and looking out. She [Rachela] was afraid that he might say something but she shut him up. He was small.

We lived on the one side, Volksdeuschers occupied the other Jewish house. One time, they organized a celebration for these Germans. The governor of the town Raschendorf came here and so did all the state dignitaries. I thought father would die, there was no wood, no coal, only poverty. The one who brought us wood dared to cut down four oak trees. Two meters of tree would fit into the cellar because half the cellar was separated from the other half. If you put in four meters of tree trunk, one could see it, the German would come and ask: "Where did you get it from?" Father woke me up and we cut the trunks into pieces. We were dragging the third piece inside with father, and then we saw the governor of the town, he said, they all spoke Polish "Good morning neighbor. It is three in the morning, if you don't steal, you don't eat. But the daughter of yours, she goes to the well, to the shop. She's a good child. Sometimes I pass her."

Motivation

Conscience. What danger were we in? The death penalty. Everyone, even if someone was in Germany, if they killed a family here, they killed also those in Germany. They imprisoned Manys. He was seventeen years old. They took a dozen or so with him. They didn't care about any extenuating circumstances. The Poles were guilty too of betraying people. Because they lied a lot. They wanted money. Behind the Bogatin's bank, there was a cellar. They took twenty five Jews from there and shot them on the platform, they fell off this platform dead, they were betrayed by one man. I worked in a synagogue. I took fiber, I was a weigher. One day, the director came to my father: "Mr. Grzesiuk, the Germans are coming to shoot Jews. To the synagogue." And father said: "My daughter is there. Please do something to save her." He says: "I'll send Mr. Kamiński, I'll tell them she's got an attack." He ran and found me. I left fast. By the time I reached the Orthodox church on Młodowska Street, two cars were driving uphill. I was running.

Liberation

When the Russians came, mother said: "Mrs. Gipsz, could you move away, because I didn't take anything from you, and people will say that I took in a fortune. I'll help you. I'll bake something, send a daughter, she will bring it to you." She gave her a blanket and a pillow. Mrs. Gipsz returned to her home town. Her brother came from Warsaw.

The Russians came, but the Poles were already there. They could see we kept Jews. "You took

money, right?" People didn't understand why we did what we did. We were more afraid of the Poles than of the Germans. Those twenty-five Jews that were killed, their betrayer bought three houses for his children. There was a search in our house. They raked through everything.

After the war

Rachela lived in Wałbrzych. She wrote all the time. She died at the age of eighty-two. In the last letter she wrote, she said: "I won't write to you again, I can't write." And she wrote about my father: "He was a father for us. Nobody would hide us but him, and he didn't refuse. And I thank you for everything, what could we do without you?" Her son, Jakub, went away with his mother and stepfather. Eventually, he went to college, he's an aeronautical engineer.

The medal

Three years after Rachela's last letter, the first letter from Jakub came. Later he visited us. It was he who nominated us. Father died in 1962, mother in 1952. Nobody apart from us knew what my parents did during the war, and after the war, nobody wanted to know - taboo. We didn't talk about it with any other people until 2000.

The date of the account: 2007

Recorded by: Tomasz Czajkowski

Jan Dąbski

My name is Jan Dąbski, I am the son of Antoni and Adela, I was born on the 23rd of May, 1953, in Chełm. Currently, I reside in Chełm and I teach for a living.

I have to admit that for many years, we didn't touch upon the topic of hiding Jews - for many reasons. One reason was the divergence of opinions about Jews between my parents - my father rated Jews completely different than my mother did. My mother was raised in a city environment - along-side well educated, hard-working and prosperous Jews. My father on the other hand, was raised in the country side and had little contact with Jews, but if he had, they were seen as people who used peasants in order to make a profit. It was well known that Jews owned the mill, the inn etc. and were money lenders within the country-side. They were viewed totally differently [by my parents], and that was the reason why discussions about Jews usually ended abruptly. The views of both sides were so different. There wasn't much talking about. In the 80's, mother once said "[Mrs.]Drutin wrote [to us]...". She [Mrs. Drutinowa] would write, firstly from the USA and then from Israel, but these letters were addressed mostly to mother's sister, who had closer contact with them [the Drutins]. Sometimes, we also received packages, but they firstly passed through the hands of mother's sister. This event was never really talked about and, to be honest, it never interested me.

After Mrs. Drutin's death, there was a pause in the correspondence. In the mean time, mother's sister also died. At some moment, the sons of Mrs. Rachela re-established contact with us. I think that at the beginning, their correspondence was very tough. They obviously tried to remember their half-forgotten Polish [language] - someone must have taught them a bit. The letters were written in simple Polish, but I understood the message and our contacts soon became much friendlier. The older of the brothers eventually came to Chełm, and visited us. It was a great surprise for mother. From that moment on, the events behind this visit interested me a lot more. Mother started telling me how it all looked [back then]. It's hard for me to say what was the reason for her earlier silence [about this topic], but mother mentioned in her statements that right after the war, some people thought that if somebody hid Jews, he became much wealthier from it. This created suspicion among neighbours. Indeed, the home of our grandparents was searched [by people looking for money] and I think that was the reason for not making this affair public.

JEWS

I found out that when the ghetto in Chełm was being eradicated, it was known that the Jews would be sent to extermination camps [for example] in Sobibór. On one of the last days of eradication [of the Ghetto], Mrs. Rachela, at that time Gipsz, came with her two children to my grandfather - asking him to hide them. Grandfather, who was a connected partially with Mrs. Rachel's husband in business matters, despite the tough times, didn't refuse and gave them sanctuary in his cellar. From what I know, there was never talk about price or payment [for the sanctuary]. From my mothers talk, it seems that there wasn't even a discussion about any sort of payment, even though it was known that the times of the German Occupation were very tough times. Food was rationed. It was hard to hide and feed a women and two children. I know, that only Mother, living with her brothers and sisters, was the only one of the children to know about the Jewish family [hiding at their home]. From time to time, they were moved from cellar to the attic, but everything remained a secret. This giving sanctuary was very dangerous because our neighbors were Volksdeutsche. The danger of rassing on someone was very high, and occupational laws stated that for hiding Jews, the whole family [of those who hid the Jews] would be punished with death. Even, my brother, who was working in Germany, would as well, be punished with death, because his family, which was in Poland, harbored Jews.

I know that they [Jews] remained in this home for the whole occupancy. After the Red Army and

the Polish People's Army came through, Grandmother asked Mrs. Rachela to move as soon as possible to one of the vacant homes in Chełm. She wanted to evade any suspicions that they had earned something for harboring this Jewish family. It is known that in a later time, searches were conducted in such homes by people looking for secreted valuables and gold, but they weren't successful.

After the War

In 1952, grandmother died. In their home at 140 Lubelska Street, lived mother's sister with her father, my grandfather Feliks [who died in 1962]. One of my mother's brothers, Andrzej, also lived there. In a later period, aunt Irena built a building in the yard, and part of this building can be seen from the street, and was meant to be a shop. From time to time, someone usually rented it as a watch-maker's workshop or something else. When Benek came, the older one of the Drutin brothers, the shop was already rented. Benek wanted eagerly to see grandfather's cellar, and so we went to the cellar. At that time, a small window could be seen, which we can't see nowadays. Benek repeated what he remembered from the time of the German occupation. His greatest experience [as a young boy] was when a German Shepherd dog was sniffing around on the other side of the wall and his mother put her hand over their [him and his brothers] mouths so they wouldn't give themselves away.

It surprised me that Benek felt so at ease when he came back to us. He talked in simple Polish. He felt like a Polish Jew - kind of like as if he was at his own home, he asked what had happened with the other members of the family, and he wanted to be taken to places where his relatives used to own some property. He was very interested in how such lost property might be retrieved by the Jews. He greeted Mother very warmly. They both cried, because it was a great experience.

Medal

I traveled with Mother, because Mother is now old and I had to be sure that her health would allow her [to travel, as well]. The ceremony was very regal. It happened in the embassy in Warsaw. There were also other people there who had helped Jews, directly or indirectly during the occupation.

In post-war Poland, there existed an education system which instilled certain things. Observing people nowadays, we can see their directivity and engagement. Not only did my mother's parents harbored Jews, but there was a large group of Poles who did similar things, they worked with a Jewish "Organizacja Bojowa" [warfare organization] during the Ghetto Uprising. Those people didn't think in terms of national differences. For them, the Jews were the same people - fellow citizens of Poland and they had to be helped.

Contacts

For about 10 years now, they [the Drutins] write letters and share their worries. From time to time, they call Mother from Israel, once the older brother, once the younger. If they'll come to Poland in the next few years, they will stop by and visit us.

Addendum

Adela Dąbska: I'll add something, if you turn it off [the recorder]

He [Benek] stood there, they were ashamed, because other people were different. I was going for a chemical pencil, I wrote out documents, I worked in farming, at the weights and scales. And he, poor guy [Benek].. [During the occupation,] they would undress people and they took apart everything. They searched windows, doors, I walked through this house. He (Benek) stood there, facing the wall. I looked, then ran up, bought him a pencil, left and came back, bringing food. I came, put the food behind him. I couldn't watch, I pitied him.

[At the time of the war, this was] a narrow street, [with] wooden homes, all different, there was [at

this neighbour's home] a cellar in the front. He took in people, charged some money, and they saved themselves [that way]. To get documents, he worked. When he got all of the money [from them], when they had nothing left, he gave them away to the Gestapo.

[During the war I worked.] I had a good director. Once, this director came to my father, and he says: "Mr. Grzesiuk, they will be moving out the Jews in a moment and executing them in that warehouse" - somebody told him and father replies: "Mr. Director, I would that my daughter not see this", and he replies: "Yes...". But there weren't any telephones at that time and it was long distance. "... I'll send Kamiński, the manager, he'll go though Sienkiewiczza [street]". He came and tells me: "Your mother has had an attack, You father said so". I ran out the door, from the synagogue, I ran out and already two cars were coming from Młodowska [street], to the tserkva, to the synagogue. I had to wait for them to pass, the cars. He didn't want me to see it [the round-up]. I was young, a child still.... That director said that this event doesn't bring joy to any one - who so ever . God created people, but you have to live wisely.