



Holocaust Studies and Materials

Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały

VOL. 5 (2009)

ISSN: 1895-247X

eISSN: 2657-3571

DOI: 10.32927

WWW: www.zagladazydow.pl

Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów IFIS PAN
Polish Center for Holocaust Research

Censor Guarding the Church. Krystyna Modrzewska's Censured Diary

Cenzor na straży Kościoła. Ocenzurowany pamiętnik Krystyny Modrzewskiej

Jacek Leociak

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences

jleociak@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1471-6926>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32927/ZZSiM.325>

Strony/Pages: 371-393



Jacek Leociak

Censorship Keeping Guard over the Church. Krystyna Modrzewska's Censored Memoir

Krystyna Modrzewska¹ was born on 14 September 1919 in Warsaw. Her father Hersz Jakub Mandelbaum was a physician, Bund member and the last head of the Jewish hospital in Lublin before the war. Her mother, Franciszka, came from Warsaw and was a pianist and music teacher. The Mandelbaum family lived in the capital until 1929. Then they moved to Lublin, where they moved into the tenement at 9 Bernardyńska Street. The outbreak of the war interrupted Krystyna's natural sciences studies in Bologna. To Lublin she brought a certificate of baptism from Italy. In Bologna "I went ahead with my old plans of changing my official faith, which I followed anyway," she would write later in her memoir. She regarded that act as "a clearly and deeply personal matter,"² which was why it was kept a secret from her family. In a memoir recorded in 1999 she would attest: "I was and I am a Roman Catholic. My mother got baptized after the war. Even my grandparents did not celebrate any holidays. We did not go to any church. But after many years I came to the conclusion that my home, which was not officially Christian, was actually the most Christian of those I knew. Because of its attitude toward people, toward values."

Her brother, 8 years her senior, graduated in 1938 from the Mechanical Engineering Faculty of Berlin Technical University. He was a member of the German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD), both when it operated legally and after it was banned. He was in charge of propaganda. Arrested many times and tortured, he wanted to escape from Germany to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939. He was apprehended while trying to cross the border and was killed in a Dresden prison on 5 October. The father, called up in September 1939 at the age of 57, went with the 8th Lublin Infantry Regiment to Hungary, where he

¹ The surname comes from the occupation-period Aryan papers that she decided to have made in fall 1940 in Warsaw. "They chose a beautifully sounding name from the telephone book," she recalls in her memoir, "and after a few days I was in possession of an 'authentic' birth certificate and ID," *Biuletyn ŻIH* 31 (1959): 68. She did not part with that surname until her death.

² Unpublished fragment of the memoir: Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute] (later: AŻIH), 302/88, page 1 of the typescript.

was interned in a camp on Lake Balaton. He developed cancer and died in a Budapest clinic in spring of 1944. At the beginning of the occupation Krystyna worked as a nurse in a Jewish hospital in Lublin. She lived with her mother at 9 Bernardyńska Street until 1 December 1939,³ when they found shelter in a hospital room after having being thrown out of the apartment by the Germans.

Krystyna tried twice to get abroad but to no avail. The first time she tried by legal means. Her valid passport and visa (she was a third-year student at Bologna University) were accepted by neither the Italian nor the Swiss embassy. The matter was rejected due to the content of the “religion” field. As “a Polish member of Judaism” she had no chance. She decided to cross the mountains to Hungary, where her father was interned. The group of refugees reached Sanok, but their guide-to-be was arrested. The rest of them escaped just in time. In March 1941, before the creation of the ghetto, the deportations of the Jews from Lublin began. During the five-day action Krystyna and her mother, warned just in time,⁴ found shelter at the rectory of a priest acquaintance, who let them stay there without a moment of hesitation. He was a former neighbor of the Mandelbaums and he had been helping them since the beginning of the occupation. At the end of 1939 Krystyna hid a radio at the rectory. The priest sometimes also invited the mother and daughter to Sunday dinners. “All that time,” writes Krystyna, “he was truly interested in our lot and helped us whenever he could and however he could.”⁵ The priest put Krystyna in “a novitiate home” near Lublin, whose mother superior was Sister Helena. Krystyna’s mother stayed in Lublin until the liquidation of the ghetto in March/April 1942. Then the priest who sheltered her at the rectory sent her to a home run by nuns in Międzyzlesie near Warsaw, where she lived until the liberation.⁶ She died in 1965.

³ In the memoir submitted to the Central Commission of Polish Jews (*Centralna Komisja Żydów Polskich*, CKŻP) in 1947 Krystyna says it was on 1 December 1939. Her mother Franciszka Mandelbaum gives the same date in her testimony given on 28 December 1945 in Lublin before the CKŻP (AŻIH 301/1295, p. 2). In turn, in her recollections recorded in 1999 Krystyna talks about 15 December.

⁴ They were warned by the wife of a doctor. The woman learnt about the planned action from Janina Mazur, the mistress of Götzloff, who was one of the Lublin Gestapo members in charge of the ghetto affairs. See AŻIH, 301/1295, Relacja Franciszki Mandelbaum, p. 6.

⁵ *Biuletyn ŻIH* 31 (1959): 72. Unfortunately, neither Krystyna Modrzewska, nor her mother Franciszka Mandelbaum, mentions the priest’s surname.

⁶ In her memoir Krystyna mentions neither the name of the congregation which runs the “novitiate home” near Lublin in which she lived, nor the name of the congregation which provided hiding to her mother. Reading the memoir, one might come to the conclusion that it was the same congregation. In turn, in her recollection recorded in 1999 she said that her mother “was helped by the Congregation of Sisters of the Bethany Family [*Zgromadzenie Sióstr Rodziny Betańskie*] [*sic!*] and lived until the liberation in their home in Międzyzlesie near Warsaw” (www.tnn.pl/himow_osoba.php?idho=129). But the Congregation, created in 1930, had its seat in the Lublin Diocese since 1935. In Międzyzlesie near Warsaw there was no Congregation of Sisters of the Bethany Family, but there were three homes run by the

Krystyna precisely indicates the moment when she began living under the assumed identity: “following the priest’s advice I took out my ‘Aryan documents’ from the hideout and on 15 March 1941 I began living the life of a different person.”⁷ She lived in the “nunnery,” which turned out to be an ordinary, rundown cottage,⁸ from March 1941 until the beginning of 1943. Initially, she paid 60 and then 120 zlotys a month to the nuns. At the same time she worked at the local Commune Council as a translator and clerk. She made extra money by writing applications, making commune maps of blacksmith shops and controlling the purchase of horse hair. She also lived for some time in “a certain small, distant commune, . . . beyond Ostrów [Lubelski],”⁹ where she found employment in the local council. Her conflict with the nuns escalated. On the one hand, they eagerly made use of her help in official matters and of her contacts in the commune council; on the other hand, they demanded strict obedience, discipline and rigorism, to which the young girl’s irrepressible nature would not be subjected. “I helped them in various matters, I fixed up an issue of butter from the dairy, I fixed up a few ‘*Bezugscheins*’¹⁰ from the commune council, I annulled payment of a certain tax. I was useful, so they tolerated me,” she writes in her memoir.¹¹ The nuns, however, complained about Krystyna’s ingratitude. When her care of a seriously ill girlfriend resulted in neglect of her duties in the commune council and in her dismissal, she was told to move out. To make matters worse, the sisters revealed to several people that they had been keeping a Jewess, which was completely unreasonable. The situation became dangerous, but fortunately Krystyna managed to get a job as a typist in the Garwolin county office, for which she left on 18 February 1943.

Soon she was promoted in the office hierarchy and was made a clerk in the “distribution and control” department. It was a dream job for her. “All the provisioning institutions of the county were directly subordinated to me,” she recalls while writing about the “gifts” sent by butchers, bakers and gardeners.¹² At the same time she was active in the underground, being a non-commissioned officer for provisions of the Quartermaster’s Office of the Lublin District of the Home Army. She ironically writes about her double or triple identity: “The whole county knew me. Some thought me a bureaucratic formalist, ruthless, persistent and punctual, while

Franciscan Sisters of Maria’s Family (*Siostry Franciszkanki Rodziny Marii*). Surprisingly, in her testimony Franciszka Mandelbaum does not mention the fact that she was hiding in the home run by the nuns in Międzyzylesie. She only says that “she was sent to the country.” She writes, “I lived for two and a half years in the country. Nobody knew me. I made sweaters and other tricot clothing, and my daughter helped me. That is how I survived until the end.” (AŻIH, 301/1295, p. 9).

⁷ *Biuletyn ŻIH* 31 (1959): 73.

⁸ Unpublished fragment of the memoir: AŻIH, 302/88, page 31 of the typescript.

⁹ *Biuletyn ŻIH* 31 (1959): 78.

¹⁰ A receipt authorizing the collection of specified goods from the German storehouse.

¹¹ *Biuletyn ŻIH* 32 (1959): 69.

¹² *Ibidem*, 75.

others knew that I was a ‘swindler’¹³ and soldier.” People knew my two faces and nobody suspected that I also had a different, third face – the Jewish one.”¹⁴ She conducted a sabotage action on a large scale. She issued fictional requirements for food rations and forged signatures on certificates, passes and permissions. The Home Army quartermaster’s office coordinated its provisioning actions strictly according to Krystyna’s guidelines. Eventually, she sent reports on the deployment and order of battle of German Army detachments. She gave the reports to a Home Army liaison officer also employed in the Garwolin county office. “It was nice to later hear the alarming news about a whole German detachment having been killed by ‘bandits’ in this or that place,” she writes with satisfaction in her memoir.¹⁵ Krystyna’s German superiors trusted her so much that at the beginning of July 1944 she was sent to Warsaw to a great briefing of provisions clerks of the whole Warsaw District. An extraordinary situation transpired. The German notables, including District Chief Fischer, shook the hand of Krystyna Modrzewska – a Polish Jewess and Home Army non-commissioned officer. “It was one of best days of the occupation for me, a day on which I was bursting with great satisfaction.”¹⁶ After that the events proceeded quickly: the Germans hastily left the county in late July 1944, the crowd rushed into the offices and the casino and removed everything they were able to carry. Krystyna left Garwolin and went to Międzyzylesie, to her mother. Krystyna, Franciszka and the nun who was hiding her crossed the front line on 5 August 1944. She arrived in Lublin on 15 September. On 1 December she moved into her own place.

During 1947–1948 she worked in the Anthropology Institute of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. In 1948 she received a Ph.D. in natural sciences, and during 1949–1950 she worked in the Anthropology Institute of the Medical Faculty of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. From 1950 she was a university lecturer, and then an assistant professor of the Department of Descriptive Anatomy of the Medical Academy in Białystok while studying at the Academy’s Medical Department. After graduating in medicine she returned to Lublin, where during 1956–1963 she was an assistant professor in the Anthropology Institute of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, and from 1964 until 1970 she was its director. After being forced to emigrate to Sweden, she worked in the Clinical Genetics Institute of Uppsala University, where in 1980 she received a Ph.D. in medicine. She became an assistant professor there a year later. She retired in 1985. She published articles and scientific (*Długość życia mieszkańców Białegostoku* [Life Span of Białystok Inhabitants], 1956) and fiction books in the 1960s. After she had retired she began writing her memoirs. She published: in 1991 *Trzy razy Lublin* (Three Times Lublin), which does not mention her hiding in the nunnery of the Congregation of Sisters of the

¹³ In her recollections recorded in 1999 for the “Lublin. Memory of the place” project she would say, “I was called *Kantermacher* [swindle-maker] during the war. The one who swindles.” www.tnn.pl/himow_osoba.php?idho=129.

¹⁴ *Biuletyn ŻIH* 33 (1960): 109.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 116.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Bethany Family; in 1993 *Czas przedostatni* (Penultimate Time), which talked about the period after leaving Poland in 1970; in 1999 *Dom przy Bernardyńskiej* (The Tenement on Bernardyńska Street) – a return to pre-war youth; and in 2002 *Z Bolonii do Uppsali* [From Bologna to Uppsala] – a description of the author's peregrinations through Polish and foreign universities.

Krystyna Modrzewska died in Sweden on 27 August 2008 and an urn containing her ashes was sunk in the sea in accord with her last will.¹⁷

* * *

Modrzewska submitted her memoir to the Central Jewish Historical Commission (*Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, CŻKH*) in 1947. Written in excellent Polish, which is indicative of the author's future literary achievements, it consisted of 177 pages of two lined notebooks with the following words on their covers: "School Work Book". The text had no title. The memoir was published in three successive issues of *Biuletyn ŻIH*: no. 31 (1959): 57–80, no. 32 (1959): 65–78, and no. 33 (1960): 105–124. The first volume, beginning with the outbreak of the war and ending with the mass executions of the Jews in the Krępiec forest near Lublin in spring 1942, was massacred by censorship. There were as many as 20 interferences. Some concern 3- or 4-sentence passages, while others encompass long paragraphs or whole chunks of standard typed text from 1.5 to 5 pages long.

It is not, unfortunately, the only example of censorship of historical sources from World War II. That is, however, a topic for a separate study. Returning to Modrzewska's memoir, let us analyze what kind of text fell victim to the censor's pencil.

It turns out that in 1959 and 1960 the fragments of the memoir about the occupation which could not be published concerned the following topics: discrimination against the Jews during the Polish German War of 1939; the obstacles placed by the Italian and Swiss embassies in the way of Poles of Jewish origin who tried to obtain visas; anti-Semitic stances among the Poles; and the looting of Jewish property. The changes introduced into those fragments of the memoir could be regarded as an attempt to soften the memoir's tenor, for many similar harsh opinions on Poles' attitudes toward the Jews were not eliminated and could be found in the published version. The passage containing the author's shocking declaration about the strangeness she felt toward Jewry, which she brutally called a "sick social organism which grew on the body of nations as a result of past mistakes of religious and historical nature" was eliminated even though in the next sentence Modrzewska confesses to "grave errors" in her reasoning at the time. The elimination of the author's reflections on her attitude toward her aunt from Warsaw and about her befriending "the aunt's beautiful acquaintance" might be explained in terms of protection of privacy.

¹⁷ The information on Krystyna Modrzewska's post-war life is based on the obituary in *Biuletyn Okręgowej Izby Lekarskiej w Białymstoku* (Bulletin of the Regional Medical Board in Białystok), www.nil.org.pl/xml/oil/oil50/gazeta/numery/n2008/n200804/n20080415.

It is strange, however, that the thread of Modrzewska's friendship with "a certain young and very beautiful girl, who was soon to play an important role in the history of my life" is present in the subsequent, published parts of the memoir.

There are also some puzzling alterations which cannot be explained in terms of any ideological tendency, protection of the good name of persons, institutions, parties or interests of the state, whatever they could possibly be. They might, however, be explained in terms of what today we would call "historical policy." For example, the theme of the escape across the mountains – fascinating in itself and told with dramatic verve – was significantly shortened. Among the passages eliminated by the censor there was a pitiless portrayal of "a farmer's daughter, an intelligent and nice girl" from Sanok, who talked about Jews being killed by the Soviet border guards with vengeful satisfaction and laughter: "They shoot at them and they go 'straight to heaven,' 'straight to heaven!'" But most of the text that was deleted seems to be of censorship-neutral character.

The passages about Modrzewska's stay at the nunnery of the Congregation of Sisters of the Bethany Family near Lublin were removed the most often. The passages containing critical assessment of the nuns' mentality, their intellectual and moral level, were eliminated. The censor did not appreciate the remarks on the everyday life of the nunnery, the sanctimonious religious practices, the hypocrisy and materialism of the clergy. He was especially alert when it came to such passages. Almost half of all the interventions fall into this category of changes. It is as if during that period "political correctness" in the People's Republic of Poland was exceptionally sensitive to protecting the image of the Catholic Church. But could the remarks on the primitivism and hypocrisy of the provincial nuns really tarnish that image, since the same memoir talks about a Lublin priest's decisive role in the author and her mother's survival?

The censor's interventions in the sphere of the author's religious experiences are all the more painful since Modrzewska's memoir belongs to the small group of testimonies concerning adult Jews hiding in cloisters. The help provided by the Catholic Church and its cloisters to Jewish children has been described in the literature. The assessment of the phenomenon, however, is a separate thing. The opinions were usually written from an apologetic perspective by members of the clergy. Moreover, the assessment did not refer to any sources, or when it did, it referred to sources of unknown origin or produced very late. It was also problematic in terms of statistical calculations – it calls for a critical approach.¹⁸ No matter how we estimate the number of cloisters as well as individual nuns and priests¹⁹ engaged in providing

¹⁸ See Dariusz Libionka's study "Polish Literature on Organized and Individual Help to the Jews (1945–2008)" *Holocaust Studies and Materials* 2 (2010): 11–75. The author devotes separate space to a critical overview of the literature concerning the Catholic Church's help provided mostly to Jewish children. The works of Ewa Kurek-Lesiak – the person who undoubtedly wrote the most about it – were analyzed with particular scrutiny.

¹⁹ In her book *Dzieci żydowskie w klasztorach. Udział żeńskich zgromadzeń zakonnych w akcji ratowania dzieci żydowskich w Polsce w latach 1939–1945* (Lublin, 2001) Ewa Kurek

help, the fact that many clergymen risked their lives to contribute to the survival of Jewish children is undeniable. A moral dilemma often raised on that occasion is the issue of the Jewish parents' reserved stance on the one hand, and the issue of the clergy's stances interpreted as proselytic on the other. Historians refer to Emanuel Ringelblum's note on the Jewish milieus' debate on the project of hiding "a few hundred Jewish children in cloisters." They quote the objection of "orthodox milieus" and of "certain national spheres" which feared that "the children would be converted and forever lost to the Jewish nation." It is stressed that no conclusion was arrived at and that "the Jewish parents were given a free hand." It is forgotten, however, that that passage ends with a distinct culminating point: "The above-mentioned project was not carried out due to various difficulties, first and foremost due to the Polish clergy's faint interest in the issue of saving Jewish children."²⁰

Memoirs of adults hiding in cloisters feature their authors' self-reflections and theological ruminations as well as presentation of the spectrum of their attitudes both toward God and religion and toward the Church as an institution. The autobiography of Oswald Rufeisen,²¹ who underwent his impassioned conversion in the Resurrection Sisters' (*siostry zmartwychwstanki*) nunnery in Mir, could be regarded as one extreme. At the opposite pole there is Krystyna Modrzewska, who, even as a Roman Catholic, was deeply disappointed with the coarseness of everyday Catholic life, with sanctimoniousness replacing spiritual experience and with the instrumental treatment of the followers. Between these two opposing poles there are testimonies full of warm feelings and gratitude, as well as those stressing the author's distance, critical attitude or sympathetically neutral attitude.

writes about 37 out of 74 existing female congregations which rescued Jewish children (supposedly there existed "indirect evidence" proving the engagement of another 6 congregations, while a further 6 allegedly provided hiding only to adults). The children were reported to have lived in 180 cloisters and care and education centers. The author assumes that a minimum of 1200 children survived thanks to help provided by the Catholic clergy. Polemizing with those figures, Israeli historian Nachum Bogner writes about "a few hundred" rescued children. See the critical analysis of Kurek's statistics in D. Libionka, "Polish Literature on Organized and Individual Help to the Jews," 55-56. According to the most recent calculation made by Elżbieta Rączy concerning the Rzeszów area, nuns helped Jewish children in 13 nunneries; help was also provided by the priests (the author enumerates over 40 surnames); she claims that thanks to the Rzeszów region clergy "a few dozen people" were rescued. E. Rączy, *Pomoc Polaków dla ludności żydowskiej na Rzeszowszczyźnie 1939-1945* (Rzeszów, 2008), 71-81.

²⁰ E. Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*, ed. A. Eisenbach (Warsaw, 1988), 114-115. Ewa Kurek refers to this passage in a biased way. For she performs an act of deliberate manipulation - she shortens the quote from Ringelblum's work, leaving out the last sentence, which is key to its tenor. *Dzieci żydowskie w klasztorach*, 33-34. Unfortunately, Teresa Prekerowa treats this passage in the same way - she leaves out the last sentence, eadem, *Konspiracyjna Rada Pomocy Żydom w Warszawie 1942-1945* (Warsaw, 1982), 192.

²¹ O. [Father] Daniel Maria, od Najświętszego Serca Pana Jezusa karmelita bosy (Oswald Rufeisen), *Połąknąłem haczyk Królowej Karmelu. Autobiografia*, ed. J. Wanat (Cracow, 2001).

While reading the integral version of Modrzewska's memoir concerning her hiding in the nunnery, it is worth pondering why the author – who was baptized while a student of Bologna University and who treated that act extremely seriously and not opportunistically – experienced such radical disappointment in the nunnery near Lublin. Why did she want to escape from her shelter, which she called “hell”? But Modrzewska remembered the period of her stay in the nunnery and her employment in the commune council in a different way as well – as a time of freedom and fullness spent among the young. The comparison of her situation with her aunt's lot in the Warsaw ghetto made her feel guilty. “I forgot about the danger, I forgot about death. It was unfair,” she wrote in her memoir.

* * *

We publish the fragments of Krystyna Modrzewska's memoir removed by the censorship. The text omitted in the version printed in *Biuletyn ŻIH* (later: BŻIH) is in Roman type. It is incorporated into the excerpts preceding it and following it which were published in *Biuletyn ŻIH* and which appear in italics for contrast. The aim was to, as far as possible, restore the integrity of those fragments of the memoir which fell prey to the censor's interventions. Consequently, the reader will know in what context the text deleted by the censor appeared. Square brackets contain essential comments on the events described in the memoir but not featured in the selection herein. The deleted passages are published according to the typescript in the ŻIH Archive (302/88) and their location is given in accordance with the pagination of that typescript. The location of the excerpts published in *Biuletyn ŻIH* is given according to the first publication. The whole was divided into thematic blocks.

Lublin's defense in September 1939: “No Jewesses could report”

On the day of my 20th birthday, the German bombers were circling over Lublin and filling that beautiful, sunny September day with an alarming and troublesome whirr. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 57]

- - - - - Lying among lush dahlia bushes in our garden hour by hour I awaited the orders from the military training unit²² by the 8th infan. reg., to which I was assigned. I was assigned to the hospital unit as a chauffeur. It was difficult to obtain that assignment. When on the last day of August '39 on the walls there appeared posters of the military training Main Command calling for ex-military training female participants (“Peowiaczki”)²³ to report – I reported on the first date specified.

²² The military training (*przysposobienie wojskowe*, PW) conducted in high schools in the 1930s involved training on courses and in camps. The participants were awarded with a certificate of military training completion of the 1st or 2nd grade.

²³ Krystyna cannot be talking here about the Polish Military Organization (*Polska Organizacja Wojskowa*, POW, whose members were commonly referred to as “Peowiacy”

For I had full general military training, private first class rank and “Junak” Cross of 1935, from the camp times. Our Command was located then in the municipal offices. Commandant Zbysławowa, my former superior, worked in the office. I reported to her. She had liked me in the past and was sorry that she had to refuse me. No Jewess could volunteer. “But you will register me, Commandant,” I answered calmly, “I am going to report tomorrow again and you will accept me. . .” The issue seemed too important and the moment felt too menacing for me to take offence at their stupid harassment. I did not waver. On the bottom of the drawer of our desk there was the certificate of baptism. It had been issued a few months before in Bologna, in Italy, where I went ahead with my old plans of changing my official faith, which I followed anyway. Besides, I thought it a clearly and deeply personal matter and nobody, not even my family, knew about it. But now an exceptional, decisive hour struck, one that required sacrifice of not only my life but also my own ambitions and most intimate secrets. I took that baptism certificate to the parish priest of the nearest church, who legalized that document with hasty contentment, ordered for it to be entered into the parish register and issued my birth certificate in accordance with Polish law. The next day I reported again to my Commandant. I was registered immediately. I also produced my green driver’s license and I was assigned to the unit. Now, counting the German bombers flying over me with impunity, I waited with naive certainty for further commands. But the orders were not forthcoming and would never come. Actually, ----- [typescript, p. 1-2]

----- *After 18 hours of shelling and bombing of Lublin, the Germans entered the city on 17 September 1939. [BŻIH 31 (1959): 57]*

An attempt to leave for Bologna: “Italy did not want any Jews”

We got a message from my aunt from Warsaw. She and grandma somehow survived the bombardment and still lived in their intact, pretty apartment in Żoliborz. I went to them on one of the first trains that ran again from Warsaw to Lublin. Not so much to pay them a visit but to go to some offices, to ask in the Italian embassy if my return to Bologna was possible. I was a third-year student of natural sciences there and I had a valid passport and visas. I did not want to lose the academic year. At my aunt’s I met a certain young, very beautiful girl, who was soon to play an important role in the history of my life. Thanks to her I am alive and I want to give my life some value. She captivated me with the beauty of her soul and later, at a time of great doubts, the thought that such people existed would repeatedly give me strength to

[POW members]) – created in 1914 at the initiative of Józef Piłsudski as a result of the merger of two underground groups from the Kingdom of Poland: the Polish Rifle Squads (*Polskie Drużyny Strzeleckie*) and the Union of Armed Struggle (*Związek Walki Czynnej*). POW was dissolved by commanding officer Edward Rydz-Śmigły’s order of 11 November 1918. Undoubtedly, she was talking about the military training courses (PW) which she completed.

survive the turmoil of misfortunes and evil which I went through. I did not get many things fixed in Warsaw. - - - - [BŽIH 31 (1959): 61]

- - - - - The embassy secretary, however, did such things “under the table” – it was actually possible to leave, but my surname ruined the whole thing. Italy did not want any Jews. I turned to the Swiss embassy. After all, I could continue my studies in Geneva. I was told to fill in a form. Because there was a “religion” field and because I knew that here too it was a decisive factor, I quit trying. I did not want to buy a visa for the price of my beliefs. It would be too high a price. I respected both myself and what I believed in too much. My girlfriend, a medical graduate from Florence, tried to convince me to have forged “Aryan” documents made. I could not bring myself to do it. I could not imagine how one could have a forged document at all. It was a crime! - - - - - [typescript, p. 8-9]

- - - - - *I returned to Lublin and I hurled myself into the hospital work. [BŽIH 31 (1959): 61]*

Unwillingness to wear the Star of David: “it was a symbol too foreign to me”

I did not want and I could not wear the yellow patch. I went outside at ease. I did not fear. - - - - - [BŽIH 31 (1959): 62]

- - - - - That star was a symbol too foreign to me; besides, I had abandoned that symbol for good, no stupid German regulation would force me to wear foreign symbols... These were more or less the lines of my reasoning. For me, educated in a state junior high school, among Polish children, in truly patriotic spirit, Jewishness meant only a sick social organism which grew on the body of nations as a result of past mistakes of religious/historical nature. Ignorance of the masses and greed of the priests sentenced that nation to dispersion many centuries ago... In my opinion there was no such nation, there was the religion, and everything else was an artificial and shoddy superstructure... Now, at times of war, I obviously took the side of those foreign to me, strange Jewish masses, I met with them on my work detail, I helped them as much as I could, I did everything that my conscience ordered me to, but to put on the star and to parade with it? – Never! And so I never put it on. Today I am happy about it, but with the passing of time and events I saw, understood and painfully felt the grave errors of my reasoning at the time. - - - - [typescript, p. 10-11]

- - - - - *I came to Warsaw for another couple of days. I brought some Italian books and I read them in the evenings, when there was no “meeting” in the “delivery room.” [BŽIH 31 (1959): 62]*

An attempt to escape abroad: “why... not the slightest trace of compassion for the Jews, but so much hatred instead”

The events of the past days,²⁴ as well as the news from my father interned in Hungary, precipitated my decision to go abroad. In the Czechs’ room we held a gen-

²⁴ In February 1940 a transport of German Jews deported from Szczecin arrived at the Jewish hospital in Lublin. The deportees were in a very poor condition, extremely exhausted, frostbitten, tortured on the way – they were dying despite the doctors’ efforts.

eral meeting over a huge map of the Beskids, marking the route with pins. The guide silently shook his head on hearing Dr. Grossmann's proposal, he did not consent to the route across the Czech Republic. It is longer and more dangerous. He announced that we would drive to Jasło. He demanded 3000 zlotys for escorting me; we set a date for the next Wednesday. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 67]

- - - - - I started the preparation for the journey. I stuffed my backpack with underwear and clothing, I took a blanket, I threw two golden 5-ruble coins into the pocket of my field jacket "just in case." Thinking that it would be best not to put it away at all. - - - - [typescript, p. 18]

- - - - *We set out on a frosty, sunny Wednesday morning at the end of February.*
- - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 67]

- - - - Sacewicz (the guide) picked me up from the hospital very early in the morning, collected the money, took note of my mother's request to protect "the only thing I had" and we drove to the railway station. I did not turn back even once. I left my mother behind, surely with her eyes full of tears, the grey hospital building filled to the brim with human suffering, the buildings on both sides of Lubartowska Street, the buildings full of scared people uncertain of tomorrow. I left the city, somehow even uglier and more miserable than usual. Who knows when and if I am going to come back here. Perhaps never. "Never" is a very bad word. I have qualms for a moment, but I calm down fast. After all, nothing bad is going to happen to my mother. She has board and lodging in the hospital, she earns some money giving private German lessons. Surely there are not going to be any deportations, for the Germans are bringing the Jews from Germany here, hence, it is the best proof that they are going to allow them to stay here. Besides, the war will last until spring at the latest, until May, perhaps until June. In the meantime I am going to meet my father in Hungary, perhaps I am going to travel further, to Italy, or perhaps even to England. I made the decision and here I face my destiny. Long, boring hours on the train. I "act the part" of Sacewicz's sister and my name is Hanka. Fortunately, my "brother" is taciturn, for I hate that name. - - - - [typescript, p. 18-19]

- - - - *We are travelling across Nisko, infamous for the camp for the Jews. I think it was one of the first concentration camps in our region. [footn.] It was called a forced labor camp but actually it was an ordinary, provisional and not yet perfected death camp. People said horrible things about that camp, but nobody believed in it. The next day by dawn we were in Jasło. Following the restaurateur's advice, we covered the next stretch across the bluish, dazzling drifts by peasant's sleigh.* - - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 67]

- - - - We spent a week in Rymanów investigating the terrain and waiting for the heavy snowstorm to stop. Then another frosty, almost joyful rush across the extensive, white plane of the fields. I feel almost a free person. Partisans' cottage in Nowotaniec - a unit of P[olish].A[rmy] officers trying to sneak to Hungary. Discussions until late at night, and another departure in the morning - to Sanok. - - - [typescript, p. 19]

- - - -

We stop in Sanok, in the guest house of an ex-petty officer; it is our staging point. We establish contact with a group of Polish officers and we organize the journey together. The Ukrainians are suspicious and we need to beware. We agreed upon a date, we pay the guide - a beautiful boy [by the surname of] Chodakowski - and in the meantime my guide Sacewicz goes to "spy out the land" in the direction of Cisna and Krzywe. Waiting for his return, I walk freely in Sanok. The Jews are sweeping the snow from the town streets. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 67]- - - The landlord's daughter, an intelligent, nice girl accompanying me, is laughing, "Can you see them, Madam?" Not so long ago they were saying, 'the tenements are ours and the streets yours,' and now it turns out that these streets are also partly theirs, because they need to sweep them!" We are going to the San, bound by great fetters of ice. "Listen, Madam. On the other side there are the Soviets' barracks, oh, hear how they're singing!" Indeed, we can hear distant, carefree singing. "They shoot as soon as somebody tries to cross the river," my companion explained to me. "The Germans on this side, and they on the other . . . But the Jews walk all the time. They shoot at them and they go 'straight to heaven' and 'straight to heaven'! Let's walk along the bank, and I'll show you a Jewess with a bike lying not far away from here . . . she wanted to cross the river and they shot her. She'll be lying like that till spring, because who would dare to go get the body, and besides, what for?" I saw that dead Jewess on the ice and a bit further another human shape frozen to the middle of the San. In the afternoon I went alone to church. I was sitting calmly on the bench and pondering why in the hearts of all those people there was not the slightest trace of compassion for the Jews, but so much hatred instead? Leaving, I felt that I had not gotten an answer to the question from where I would like to hear it the most. - - - [typescript, p. 19-20]

- - - - Sacewicz returned neither that day nor the next. The third day one of my officer acquaintances popped into my place with news about Chodakowski's arrest and about a great roundup. The streets are lined with gendarmes and Ukrainians, they are searching houses and taking everybody who is not registered and the landlords. "We are escaping," he finally announced, which sounded like an order, "everybody on his own." - - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 67]

"Meeting in the evening at the next railway station. Who is not there - must have evaporated." He left. I did not want to put my landlords at a risk; they were quivering with fear anyway. I already knew that Sacewicz had fallen into the Germans' hands. I put the rucksack on my back, I took the blanket, and bid my farewell to the landlords, who were certain that I was to die. I walked the side streets towards the San, then, through drifts up to my waist, to the rail track. I did not see even one German, nobody so much as accosted me. I was walking or actually wading through the snow. My heart was working hard, I repeatedly became bathed in sweat - in some places the snow was up to my shoulders. I walked for many hours along the track. Today, when I think about that distance, I cannot believe that I could walk it. I was walking not thanks to my physical strength but with the power of my will. In the evening, at a small station, whose name I do not recall - I met only two of my companions' group. We got on the first train that stopped at the station and went

to Tarnów. Our ways parted there. In the railway station snack bar, over glasses of vodka, we shook hands and exchanged wishes for a long time. Such experiences unite people. - - - [typescript, p. 20–21]

- - - *The next day I returned to Lublin from the unsuccessful trip.* - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 67]

In Warsaw: “I befriended my aunt’s beautiful acquaintance”

In April I left for Warsaw. I lived in Żoliborz at my aunt’s. The war with all its atrocities had not been felt there yet. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 68]

- - - I read books, learnt French, wandered about Warsaw, visited my acquaintances. My aunt loved me dearly, but perhaps not more than I loved her, only I could not show it to her. I have a bad personality, difficult for others and for myself. I tried to cover many things and many feelings in my life with unnecessary and painful brusqueness. I feel guilty that I made these last months of her peaceful life difficult, that I poisoned them with my uncontrolled excesses. I committed other still more unforgivable sins against her, which influenced my future life. I befriended my aunt’s beautiful acquaintance, whom I have already mentioned here. She lived a few hundred meters from our place – I visited her every evening, and the memories of those evening visits, those wonderful meetings with the immaculate beauty of that girl’s soul, our wandering on the uplands of our thoughts together, were everything to me, an incomparable, unique and unforgettable happiness. - - - [typescript, p. 21–22]

- - - *In October 1940 the Warsaw Jews were ordered to move into the residential district, which at that time still could not be simply called a ghetto. The Żoliborz joyful life was over.* - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 68]

In Lublin: “my... schoolmates usually did not recognize me”

[The aunt moves from Żoliborz to the ghetto, Krystyna Modrzewska returns to Lublin – J.L.]

My forged ID was lying useless in my suitcase. It was difficult for me to appear under a different name in the city, where I had lived for about a dozen years and where I had many acquaintances. I still went out without the armband. Sometimes I did not go out for a few days in a row. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 70]

- - - On the streets my former junior high school friends usually did not recognize me. A female teacher I met asked why I was not wearing the armband. I was more surprised than outraged by that question. “Do you think that one should conform to all German regulations, Madam?” I asked. “No, but...” Much time passed before I finally understood that Polish “but.” It was not easy. I did nothing. Actually I was becoming more and more dumb and stupid from day to day, but it is not a pursuit. I wrote letters to the ghetto and this was the primary activity of those days. I do not know what I could have been writing about then. Perhaps about those better days that were, perhaps about those that would come, in which I believed less and less? Perhaps about the sad, everyday events? I do not know. All I know is that those letters were happiness for me and joy also for those beyond the walls who received

them – a cordial thread connecting with the world, with the open free space. - - - - [typescript, p. 24-25]

- - - - *I was once in the Warsaw ghetto, I spent there the first few days of February 1941.* - - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 70]

**Hiding in the nunnery near Lublin:
“The ‘nunnery,’ turned out to be an ordinary, rundown cottage”**

[During 10–14 March 1941, 9200 Jews were deported from Lublin to various small towns of Lublin County. On 20 March the Lublin District Governor Ernst Zörner issued an order on the creation of the ghetto in Lublin. By 5 April the remaining Jewish population in Lublin was to be deported to a specified area. Krystyna Modrzewska’s mother turned for help to the priest acquaintance – J.L.]

- - - - *following the priest’s advice I took out my “Aryan documents” from the hideout and on 15 March 1941 I began living the life of a different person. The priest entrusted me to some nuns* - - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 73]

---, he introduced me to Sr. Helena, who was paying him a short visit, and the next day I was to go to the novitiate home near Lublin directed by her. It was agreed that I would be there as a candidate (a postulant), that I would help the sisters in administrative and office matters, and I would pay 60 zlotys a month by way of compensation for the costs of living. At that time it was a significant sum, but my mother soon sold a valuable trinket, a golden tiepin or something like that – she paid about 200 zlotys to the sister and so my existence was secured for a longer period of time. It was difficult for me to take money from my mother, I promised myself that I would earn the next sum with my own work. I swiftly prepared myself for the journey. I knew cloistral life and I was looking forward to it. In Bologna I lived in a boarding house of the Sacré Coeur Sisters for a long time and I experienced many beautiful and fine moments there. I got to know the deep delight of solitude and meditation, of silence and ecstasy. I met beautiful and worthy people there who were good with that abstract, ideal goodness. The stories about the great cloisters’ overindulgence were lies. The notion about the mental limitations and ignorance, the oppression of free thought and sanctimoniousness is untrue and harmful. In the nunnery I saw great minds, impeccable characters, selfless souls full of great love for people. And I was looking forward to close contact with that community full of kindness, silence and buoyancy. I craved rest, relaxation of the nerves, full immersion in the purely, idealistically Christian atmosphere. To rest after those horrible war events, away from it, in the silence of cloistral gardens, in the whiteness of the silent corridors, in cool rooms and among spirit-raising conversations. With such an attitude more or less I got on the evening train, which after half an hour’s ride left me at a small, totally dark station. Sr. Helena had been waiting for me – she found me in the darkness with difficulty, put me on the horse-drawn wagon, and we drove along the bumpy road. A long series of disappointments began. The “nunnery” turned out to be an ordinary, rundown cottage lo-

cated in a small garden on a big swampy pool. Besides Sr. Helena there were only two other nuns, very short, fat Sr. Maria and thin Sr. Marta with a yellow face and evil eyes. They greeted me with kisses on the arm and disappeared in the darkness of the hall. I was left in a spacious, almost empty room lit with a mean kerosene lamp. Huge navy-blue shadows quivered unpleasantly on the walls. I did not sleep a wink the whole night. And then day came, and others followed, they lined up into weeks, into months. My first job was to translate and write letters to a German office which the sisters had something to do with. I slogged away for a few days at that correspondence and I finished it to Sr. Helena's great contentment. Then I was sent to church and since the retreat was being conducted there I had to sit there for a few hours a day. The priest and missionary droned and bored, blabbed some ridiculous stories, spoke hysterically from the pulpit. The sisters sat bewitched, the village women were drying tears of emotion . . . I felt as if something heavy fell onto my head from a roof. It was the first time I found myself in such an unsophisticated environment and it was the first time I heard such idiotic sermons. I did not suspect that it could be so, that my beautiful truth looked like that in its "everyday," native version. That few days', clownish retreat was, however, only a prelude to my surprises, disappointments and outrage. I was introduced to the missionary and old parish priest. I had to kiss those "father confessors" on their paws in accordance with my role and the nuns' admonishments. Soon, I learnt that they were not as stupid as their sermons. They were ordinary conmen, consciously deceiving that crowd of sheepskins and kerchiefs, wringing tears of emotion and change, laughing their heads off about the "tricks" they used. I thought that these were only some unhealthy local relations and I decided not to worry about it at all. Sr. Helena made sure that I did not run out of work and I was thankful to her for that. She taught a tailoring course and one of my duties was to dictate to the students some "principles of modern fashion" crookedly written in a thick notebook. This lasted another couple of days and was deadly boring. But I performed my work that time as well. Only with the next orders did the series of my worries begin. On Saturday evening the nuns' tailoring students finished a few men's shirts and were finishing up some comically tailored dresses - I was ordered to iron the shirts . . . I was ashamed to admit that I had never ironed before. I began doing it v. clumsily. I burnt the front of one shirt which occasioned the "maiden's" smiles and Sr. Helena's anger. I said that I preferred to chop wood than to iron . . . I was told that it was a virtue to perform all work obediently. However, the next day, being granted my request, I was told to chop wood. But I cannot boast and say that I performed that work v. skillfully. The "maidens" - mighty country girls - were splitting their sides with laughter while crossing the backyard. "That's wrong, see, that's how one holds an axe . . ." they taught me. Sr. Helena was smirking, squinting and nodding her head with disdain. "You can only operate a fountain pen," she finally told me one evening. "How grateful I am to my parents that they brought me up to know each kind of work . . . Well. I thought that you would help in the sewing room, but you have not even been taught how to hold a needle properly. From tomorrow on I shall

employ Sr. Maria at the sewing – you will go to the kitchen. The food here is simple, but lunch must be ready at 12 sharp. . .” I began playing the cook. The food was indeed simple. I made rye flour soup for breakfast, lunch and dinner, sometimes potatoes or groats for the Sunday cucumber or pea soup. Apart from that I had to cook and mash potato peelings for the pigs and some pap for the goats and to mix old bones with new glop for a skinny, stinky dog. The most difficult thing was to light the stove at all, it smoked and died, I had to conserve wood. Then I scrubbed all those large, burnt pots, I washed the plates, tidied up. At about 3 p.m. I went to “watch over” the grazing goat and on that occasion I was allowed to read a book from the Sisters’ religious library. I also learnt the lives of all the best-known saints in great detail. That reading often proved useful later, during Sunday “chats” with the Sisters and later, during my wandering “on the Aryan side.” I was instructed to say the prayers together with the Sisters after dinner. The prayers lasted about 40 minutes – my knees hurt unbearably, the thoughtless manner of reciting them disturbed me. In the morning, at 6 I went to church with the sisters. During lunch I read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis – nobody listened to it and nobody comprehended it. The sisters were constantly arguing with each other and calling each other “whores.” I opened my eyes wide and it seemed to me that all that was happening in some dismal, grating dream. The sisters lied to each other and stole from one another. Being senior, Sr. Helena did not allow for one of the younger sisters to be given food, or made her eat kneeling – “as punishment.” The punished sister stole bread from the cupboard. And I was right in the midst of that mess. Sr. Helena suspected that she would make me her “eye and ear.” I was not fit for that role. Actually, I took the side of the “punished” sisters, for they were usually totally innocent. Besides, I was not allowed to have my own opinion. I was to cook and be silent. Sr. Helena listened at the door, appeared out of thin air as an embodiment of deceit and evil. I heard many unpleasant, offensive words from her. I was put in a small room with two girls. One was a total orphan, a tuberculosis patient, brought up by the Sisters. An honest, miserable creature. The other one was a former student of the Sisters, now, after a pulmonary hemorrhage, she was lying there so that the local doctor could take care of her. I was forbidden to talk to these girls, for the Sister feared rumors. She was constantly afraid of rumors, constantly spotted them everywhere, while incessantly tangling up the webs of shoddy, tawdry intrigues. Later, when the father took the ill girl home, I was left with Agatka – the Sisters’ ward. She was 16 and had open tuberculosis. Sister Helena beat her, broke sticks on her, often in my presence. I cannot comprehend today how I could look at that, with my heart trembling, but without a word, without the slightest reaction. I was depressed, overwhelmed by all that, tired, confused.

I began thinking about escaping from that hell. But where to? I was hurting; in the end I would have escaped, returned to Lublin and died in Majdanek, if it had not been for the following incident. - - - [typescript, p. 30-35]

- - - *At the end of May 1941, green, menacing “cabs” [“budy”] with German gendarmes arrived in our village. The arrests started. Two young priests were taken,*

as well as the commune head and commune secretary, the female teacher who was at the same time a translator in the Commune Council, and a few landlords. A few days later Sr. Helena came back from the Commune Council with a mysterious look on her face and she was extraordinarily kind to me the whole day. In the evening she told me that a translator was urgently needed in the Commune Council and that she promised to talk to me about that. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 73]

Work in the Commune Council: “the sisters were kind and sweet”

[Modrzewska finds employment in the Commune Council – J.L.]

I was promised a daily wage of 5 zlotys; the work lasted from 8 until 4 with a one-hour lunch break. I was to commence immediately. I introduced myself to the clerks behind the counter. One of the ladies, young, thin Ms. Marysia, in a pale pink sweater, with a pale yellow face with pale blue eyes, took care of me and began acquainting me with the difficult art of typewriting. I began slogging away at documents and at formulating replies to them. At first it went quite slowly, but I managed somehow. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 73]

- - - - The lunch soup at the Sisters’ was extremely tasty that day. Probably because I was not the one who cooked it. The Sisters were kind and sweet. These were stupid, simple women and the office of a village clerk impressed them. Besides, they counted on my help with the commune authorities, on whom they were dependent in a number of economic matters. I was doing better. - - - [typescript, p. 36]

- - - - *The work in the Commune was quite interesting, I practiced the German language, I was better and better at typewriting, I spent most of the day outside the sisters’ house. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 74]*

Peeling potatoes, mending socks, teaching religion, writing applications

[The Commune secretary’s sister-in-law recognized Modrzewska as she remembered her from the junior high school in Lublin – J.L.]

I was only 16 km from Lublin and such a dangerous meeting could happen any time. I would jeopardize not only myself, but also the sisters and the priest who pulled strings for me. I should avoid meeting people and I should hide in the sisters’ kitchen again. After a short reflection I quit the job in the Commune. I could not take risks. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 74]

- - - - The sisters basically praised my move, but were silent and whispered in the corners. They would have been glad to get rid of me, but they held in high esteem the priest who pulled strings for me and who was a big fish in the Episcopal Curia. I once again began peeling huge buckets of potatoes and carrying food to the pigs. The sisters did some sewing for the Germans quartered [there] and they mended heaps of their socks. I was to sit and mend the German socks for 12 hours a day. We charged from 50 groszy to 2 zlotys for each darn. Obviously, Sr. Helena was the one to collect all the charges. She told me that she was taking my earnings, because she

was keeping me almost for free anyway, that she counted “on things being different and they are as they are” and that from the next month she was going to increase my payment from 60 zlotys to 120 zlotys. She could not do otherwise. She thought that the requirement, excessive for those times and conditions, would force me to leave. But I had nowhere to go. I mended the socks relentlessly and pondered on how to get those 120 zlotys a month. But chance came to my rescue again. Due to his ailment, the parish priest asked the Sisters to conduct the catechization of the children who were to go to the first Communion in the arrested curate’s stead. 2 lesson hours every day for a month. Paid from the parish funds. The sisters, occupied with tailoring and the household, who had serious trouble with reading and writing anyway, ordered me to perform the task as they did not want to refuse the parish priest. The catechization began. As there was no other place available, the lessons were held in the cemetery chapel. Every day after dinner I would cram information about God’s commandments and those of the Church, about virtues and sins, into about thirty, mostly dumb heads. I conscientiously taught the brats the things that I myself did not want to learn, [I made them] memorize bombastic formulas, which were a painful disfiguration of a simple, unpretentious truth. In short, in accordance with all regulations and to the Sisters’ temporary contentment – I stupefied those small morons.

From time to time somebody brought a letter or application to be written in German and gave me 5 zlotys for it. I collected these 5 zlotys, but it was still nowhere near 120 zlotys. And the 1st day of the new month was approaching. A commissar of a local agricultural and trade co-operative post began boarding with the sisters. He was an educated person and former landowner from Volynia, a nice, elderly man, who some time after getting to know me proposed me a seasonal, daily paid job in his office. I accepted eagerly and I had another break from the Sisters’ oppression and swinging moods. - - - - [typescript, p. 37-39]

- - - - *Then I worked at the distribution of crop levy, I wrote and rewrote long columns of digits, I counted, wrote and the days somehow went by. I got 9 zlotys a day and I looked into the near future a little more boldly.* - - - - [BŽIH 31 (1959): 74]

- - - - I began eating together with the Sisters’ boarders, i.e. like a human. The Sisters’ control over my every step lessened; I began slipping out for walks more and more often and freely. I became friends with Marysia, the commune clerk, and her girlfriend Stacha. We drank the “bruderschaft,” met a few times a week – sometimes we were joyful and quite carefree. The girls sent each peasant who came to the commune and needed something, an application or a German document, to me, i.e. to the so-called “nunnery.” Thanks to them, even when my work in the contingent office ended, I did not have to worry about money. - - - - [typescript, p. 39]

- - - - *I earned 5-10 zlotys writing the applications, sometimes even as much as 15 zlotys, I paid the sisters.* - - - - [BŽIH 31 (1959): 74-75]

**Working and living at the Sisters': "I forgot about the danger,
I forgot about death"**

[Modrzewska corresponds with the aunt living in the Warsaw ghetto – J.L.]

They suffered there, and what about me? I ran in the meadows and grasslands, I knew all the paths in the fields, I laughed among the young, I was carefree, free, satiated. I forgot about the danger, I forgot about death. It was unfair. But I consoled myself believing that after the end of the war those horrible years of theirs would level out, they only had to survive... I did not doubt that they would survive and I continued living the peaceful life, making use of all the rural delights. I could draw a bit and when an order came to the Commune to make maps of all the blacksmith's shops located in the commune I became the "technician" and I began drawing those maps. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 75]

- - - Sr. Helena lent me an iron meter stick, I bought a small bottle of ink in Lublin and my wandering from one blacksmith's shop to another began. I wandered, whistling joyfully, but out of tune, I meticulously measured the blacksmith's shop full of smoke, its distance from the buildings, from the road, in accord with the county regulations. Then I got milk to drink and fruit to eat, I was paid 50 zlotys without hesitation and I went further. At home I drew the maps, finished them up with ink and brought them to the commune, where they were authenticated and sent to the county office, to be validated. - - - [typescript, p. 40]

- - - I felt awfully proud. 50 zlotys was a lot more than getting five zlotys for boring applications! But there were not too many blacksmith's shops in our commune and the source of my excellent earnings soon dried up. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 75]

- - - I paid 240 zlotys to the Sisters for two months in advance, I had my boots soled and I was left with a few zlotys in my pocket. Of course, I did not worry about it, because actually apart from the so-called "living" in the country there was nothing one could spend money on. Once I spent a couple of groszy at a church fete – Marysia and I had a photo taken against a background with an angelic villa among Italian cypresses and Polish banners on a square, cracked canvas. I won some motley trinket at the church fête lottery and I gave it to Agatka – my "neighbor" at the Sisters'. And of course I ate loads of ice-cream, not paying any attention to the strange taste and color. But a church fête is rarely organized and money is not needed at all. Since dinner is eaten in the "novitiate house" at 6 p.m., Sr. Helena permitted me to go out also after dinner. But I had to be back by 8 p.m. If I were late, the kind permission would be revoked. From 3 to 8 p.m. I hung out with Marysia, Stacha and all the young people, the so-called village "golden youth," on a causeway or in the garden in front of Marysia's house, or we listened to records at Stacha's, told anecdotes, and not infrequently drank a few glasses of vodka. Before 8 p.m. I jumped to my feet like Cinderella from the fairy tale and rushed home. - - - [typescript, p. 40–41]

- - - On my birthday I went to Lublin, to my mother, for the whole day. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 75]

Severe winter 1941/1942

[Modrzewska recalls the tea organized in the Lublin ghetto on the occasion of her 22nd birthday by an acquainted Jewish family from Szczecin – J.L.]

I believed that those kind, good, beautiful people would somehow survive and return to their homes. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 76]

- - - The winter of 1941–1942 was severe.

I lived with Agatka in a big, unheated room. In the morning, the whitewashed, bluish walls glittered with snow. The water in the basin froze during the night. My feet were severely frostbitten and following the advice of one of the Sisters I wrapped them in newspapers dipped in kerosene before putting boots on. - - - [typescript, p. 42]

- - - *In December 1941 my acquaintance – the “contingent” commissar – proposed the performance of certain work on behalf of the Farming-Trading Co-operative. I was to be sent into the commune as a controller of horses’ shearing. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 76]*

Horse hair business and changes in the nunnery: “I had unlimited freedom”

The shearing in our commune lasted about 15 days, I put aside over 25 meters of horse hair, and I earned about 200 zlotys! I also committed the first embezzlement in my equine carrier, which developed later. From one of the wagons I took 3 kg of horse hair, which was sought after by Lublin brush makers, and I sold it “under the table,” charging 70 zlotys a kilo!²⁵ I was rich. I paid for the board and lodging and I had a few hundred zlotys in my wallet. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 77]

- - - That money allowed me to buy a few Christmas presents and to play the role of Santa. Dressed in an enormous cloak, with a mask on my face and a sack on my back, I waded through the drifts to Marysia’s house and I knocked with a stick on the window, just when the whole family was sitting down to eat Christmas Eve supper. How happy the adults were and how the children squealed! Then I took off the Santa costume in the hall and sat at the table with them. I liked all of them dearly and I felt good in that simple, peasants’ home. The mother was a hospitable, good woman, the father – a grey-haired, 70-year-old man – had true “common sense,” was witty and beautifully told various stories about the distant times, past events and adventures. I liked Marysia’s brother – Adamek, a tall, kind-hearted beanpole, the actual landlord and a farmhand at the same time. He had huge, toil-worn, hard palms and the joyful, blue eyes of a child. I liked the second brother – Antek – a cheerful prankster, the best singer in the village, who was a boy with a heart of gold, even though he engaged in fights at parties, hit his wife, distilled moonshine and drank it himself. I liked the oldest of them – Janek, who lived in a different village and visited

²⁵ “I was called *Kantermacher* during the war. The one who swindles.” www.tnn.pl/himow_osoba.php?idho=129.

his parents only on Sundays, when he drove to the church with his wife and children. He had a beautiful son and a slightly stupid daughter – Marysia’s goddaughter – and first and foremost a pretty wife, Helcia, whom his loving gaze followed to the contentment of us all. 20 years after their wedding they behaved like an engaged couple. I often went to their house, I felt good there, I became attached to those people. Marysia knew everything about me. I told her of my own free will, driven by some subconscious, intuitive conviction that I should and could trust her. I was right. She kept the secret, and provided me with lots of help and kindness.

In the meantime certain changes took place in my “nunnery.” The Sisters under the leadership of Sr. Helena were called to a different post, to Nałęczów, and to us came Sr. Jadwiga, as the senior nun, Sr. Władysława and Sr. Paula. Sister Władysława was boring, mean and constantly snotty, and Sr. Paula was loud and screechy, but that change was absolutely positive. In short, the change might be described as follows: there was less shouting, and more food. Sr. Jadwiga was calm and composed, and personally quite friendly towards me. I had unlimited freedom. I gave private German lessons to the son of the deputy commune secretary, I wrote applications for the peasants to the county office for issues of building wood, I ran the household books as a favor to the sisters and I hung out at Marysia’s place in the evenings, talking, drinking milk which my mother always offered me, or vodka, when a bigger crowd gathered, Marysia’s sister – a saleswoman from a neighboring village – a couple of boys, some of the commune friends came over. - - - [typescript, p. 44-45]

- - - Winter ended. Spring of 1942 started off badly. One of the sisters came back one day from Lublin with horrifying news. Heaps of corpses were lying in the streets, for massacres of Jews had been going on in the city for a few days. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 77]

The Lublin ghetto liquidation: “the sisters want to get rid of me”

[30 000 Jews were deported to Bełżec during the action, which began on 17 March and lasted with pauses until 20 April. The Lublin ghetto being liquidated, Krystyna Modrzewska turns to her priest acquaintance for help for her mother. At first he keeps the mother at his rectory, then sends her to a home run by the sisters in Międzyzlesie near Warsaw – J.L.]

My mother moved in there as a lonely old lady, widow and deportee. I did not have to worry about her life for a while. But that calmness was full of anxiety, full of tormenting uncertainty. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 78]

- - - With the situation becoming more and more serious and the increasing persecutions of the Jews, the Sisters’ attitude toward me was becoming clearly negative. I could clearly see that they wanted to get rid of me. Maybe they were afraid – I do not know. All I know is that they were v. unpleasant. - - - [typescript, p. 47]

- - - *At that time I became employed in the Commune Council again, not as a steady worker but as a typist to fill in the identification cards that had just been*

introduced (“Kennkarte”). Having no other choice, I took the risk, I had to earn. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 78]

The peasants’ looting of the murdered Jews’ property: “I feel guilty that I am alive”

[Modrzewska returns to the “novitiate home” after a short stay in a small commune outside Ostrów Lubelski and becomes employed in the local office again. In that period the Germans were conducting mass executions of the Lublin Jews in the forests near Krępiec. It might have been the execution of approximately 1200 people – deportees from the liquidated Lublin ghetto who were in Majdan Tatarski without valid documents – which took place on 20 April 1942. The next execution in the Krępiec forests was carried out on 2 September 1942. Some of the group of about 1000 people taken from Majdan Tatarski were deported to Piaski, and some were executed in the forest near Krępiec²⁶ – J.L.]

The Jews escorted to death abandoned their money and valuables in the forest; it was an unnecessary ballast during that last walk. They often tore the money so that the Germans could not use it, since it had become totally useless to them. These were normal reactions of despair bordering on madness. The local peasants eagerly gathered those torn-up banknotes, stacked them up together with flour and brought them to the Commune, to pay due taxes. They obtained that money so easily that it could be used even to pay taxes. The Krępiec women ferreted with kids about the road along which the groups of Jews walked, sometimes people found rings and earrings, watches, gold coins, photographs. . . In the Krępiec school some boys were playing with “found” Jewish rings and bracelets. The headmaster saw it and took the things away, threw them somewhere far behind the school buildings. “Shame, sin!” he shouted at his students, “There is human blood on these things, do not touch them!” But few shared his opinion. - - - [BŻIH 31 (1959): 80]

- - - - The Germans were killing “those funny Jews and bawling Jewesses,” so why should the Poles not make use of that? And they used it as much as they could. The peasants went with sacks to the place of the executions, for a liter of vodka the Ukrainian watchman let them take a few items of clothing from the huge heaps towering over the pitches. The clothes of the murdered were bought, stolen. The country youngsters waited hidden behind the trees from morning, they watched the transports passing by, calmly heard out the shots and shouts, then they stole to the heap of clothes abandoned chaotically and in deathly terror, they grabbed what they could and ran away. Sometimes the Ukrainians shot at those petty thieves – two boys were killed. After “work” the Ukrainians went to the nearest cottages to cool down, rest, drink some tasty milk. The landlords’ wives served them eagerly, and the landlords chatted ingratiatingly, offered moonshine and tobacco, asked for a few suits, or some Jewish shoes, or for permission to drive their horse-drawn wagon

²⁶ See T. Radzik, *Lubelska dzielnica zamknięta* (Lublin, 1999), 50–51, 55.

into the forest and to collect those various pieces of junk, suitcases, briefcases and other “*cymesy*” [cat’s whiskers], as they called them. They asked the leaving bravos if some Jews would be brought the next day as well. . . I went through some rough days. Once I was sent in some commune business to the Lublin county office. I went by horse-drawn wagon, and while entering the city through Kalinowszczyzna, a district not long ago inhabited by Jews, I saw traces of the recent horrifying pogrom. The district seemed deserted; there were scraps of eiderdowns and heaps of feathers, straw, smashed furniture, broken dishes, piled up rags lying on the sidewalks and streets. The doors of the houses had been forced open, the window panes were broken, here and there was a hanging scrap of torn net curtain. At every step there were signs of the tragedy that had taken place here. In the street dirt lay Jewish books and papers, a notebook, an ostentatious group photograph, a shattered violin, a brush for polishing the floor, an old-fashioned hat. And silence, overwhelming silence of the deserted, empty houses. I could see the shelves of demolished stores, the products scattered about – everything was once important and needed. I feel again, as once in the Warsaw ghetto, that I belong to those murdered people, to the people from these silent, Jewish streets. I feel that Jewishness is not a religious or social issue, that it is a matter of blood, a deep significance, biological truth present in each cell of the body, indefinable but powerful. And again I feel guilty that I am alive. - - - [typescript, p. 51-52]

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska* and *Jerzy Giebułtowski*

Key words

the Holocaust, Jews-Poles 1939-1945, hiding on the Aryan side, help and rescue, the Catholic Church and the Jews 1939-1945