



First Meeting – Ester Pe’eri (*née* Mendelewicz)

On Holocaust Remembrance Day I went, as I always do, to the cemetery in Holon. I made my way to the monument which was erected in memory of the Krzepice townspeople who perished in the Holocaust. Looking from afar, I recognised many of my father’s friends whom I had known in my childhood.

I walked slowly towards the group of people who had gathered to commemorate their family members. Already, from a distance, I noticed Mr Rotbard, whom people called Fiszl. He was a friend of my father and, during our first years in the country, we lived in the same building, at Salma St. 7, in Jaffo.

Fiszl was busy preparing for the ceremony and was waiting for the cantor to arrive. In the meantime, he handled a large scroll made of parchment, on which he had written the names of the townspeople who had perished (the names appear at the back of this book). Fiszl approached me cheerfully and presented me with a copy of the scroll. He also gave me a key to the chest built into the foot of the monument, in which the scroll was placed for eternal remembrance.

Suddenly, a woman, whom I had never met, before approached me. She turned to me and asked, without hesitation, “Are you the son of Majer Chaskelewicz?”

Seeing the astonished look that must have spread over my features, she said, “You remind me of your father very much in how you look and in how you walk. I knew your father in his youth. The connection between us was broken off due to my marriage - after leaving Krzepice, I moved to Częstochowa, where my husband was living”.

Before I was able to ask any more details, Josef Pe’eri - a colleague of mine from work - joined the conversation. I was very surprised. Josef Pe’eri (formerly Fridman) had worked in a subsidiary company of the Mekorot Water Company Ltd., called “EMS” - Electromechanical Services. Pe’eri was the manager of the manpower division and we had a working relationship. He used to consult me extensively and received assistance in central affairs. We worked together for some twenty years, until his retirement.

Mrs Pe’eri, standing by his side, introduced me to Josef, her husband. I told her, at once, that I had already known her husband for many years, due to our working together. “We have a good relationship”, I explained, “and we enrich one another in the professional sense. I am glad to meet you, too, and I hope you will be of great assistance to me in the mission I have taken upon myself”.

Very sadly, Josef Pe’eri passed away a few months after that gathering in the Holon Cemetery and the meeting with Ester was postponed.

Many months went by before I rang her. We arranged to meet at the “Golden Age” home in Rishon LeZion, to which she had moved after her husband’s death. I arrived around four in the afternoon. She was very happy to see me, but made sure to tell me, in advance, that our time was limited. She needed to participate in the activities taking place at the “Golden Age” home. She would be greatly missed by her friends at the bridge game and she could not be absent.



My father and mother, and me

From the right: My father, me, my mother, and my brother Natan



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R-L: My father, me, my mother, and my brother Natan



Me in my mother's arms, and my father Majer on the left (Munich 1947)



My brother and me



My father in a Polish military uniform

In the short time that we had at our disposal, Ester Pe'eri was able to impart crucial information to me and she even managed to surprise me by telling me that my childhood friend, Dov Mendelewicz, was her nephew. It emerged that Ester was the sister of Dov's father. He and his family had lived next to us for several years, in an Arab house at Salma St. 7 in Jaffo, the construction of which had not been completed. The house had been given to my father, who put up two other families of Holocaust survivors from Krzepice in it. Each of the families lived in one room and they shared the kitchen and bathroom.

Besides the Mendelewicz family, the Rotbard family also lived with us and, therefore, many Krzepice *landsleit* came to our lodgings to meet with the three families.

Later on, the Mendelewicz and Rotbard families left the house in Jaffo. The Mendelewicz family moved to Aba Hillel Street in Ramat-Gan and the Rotbard family moved to Bialik Street in the same town.

My mother, on the other hand, following the death of my father in 1952, made a considerable effort to move to a different apartment. In 1960, we moved to Ramat-Aviv, to the new neighbourhood that had just been built north of the River Yarkon, which was later to be called "The Green Ramat-Aviv".

Let us return to Krzepice and to my family. It turned out that my father's family - the Chaskelewicz family - and the family of Ester Mendelewicz lived next to each other on ul. Rębielską. It was from her that I heard details about my grandfather Mojsze and my father Majer for the first time.

With great excitement, Ester told me about life in the town - about the lifestyles of the youth and about the relations between the inhabitants of the nearby towns and those of the city of Częstochowa, to which many of the residents of the towns came for commerce, to visit the fairs, to go to the bank or to just arrange different affairs at the governmental agencies, such as registering a marriage or the trans- location to a another city.

In the smaller towns, too, little markets were held and the inhabitants of the nearby towns occasionally visited them. The Krzepice market, for instance, was on the main street. This was a clean and orderly marketplace and access to it was very convenient.

Ester Mendelewicz's parents were the proprietors of a cakes and sweets factory. They also ran a wholesale shop which was located not far from the factory, on the other side of the street. In front of the Mendelewicz family's shop was a butcher's owned by a local Pole, who sold mainly pork products. The proprietor would always ask his Jewish colleagues, "How is it that Jews are permitted to eat non-kosher meat on *Yom Kippur*, which is the holiest day in Judaism?" It turned out that there were Jewish youths who chose not to fast on *Yom Kippur* and, as they were not allowed to eat, they would approach the butcher secretly and, from him, buy pork with which to appease their hunger.

Ester enlightened me when she told me that religious observance had not stood at the centre of Jewish life in Krzepice. About half of the community were not religious - including my father and grandfather.

However, the most important detail regarding my father, which I learned from Ester, was that he had been drafted into the Polish Army and that he had deserted to Russia. Her words solved one mystery - among the documents I had received, I found one photograph of my father in a Polish military uniform. Why had he been drafted and what were his duties? To this day, I do not know the answers, but the fact that he had been drafted had now been made clear to me.

Ester and Josef Pe'eri made *aliyah*¹ in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the War. As it was Ester who told me about my father's military service, it is therefore my conclusion that he was drafted before the onset of the War. Ester also mentioned the fact that my father had deserted to Russia during the Second World War, but she could provide me with no further details.

When I eventually travelled to Poland on the sorrowful and difficult quest, during the course of which we visited the concentration camps and the towns in which the majority of the Jewish population had perished, we in fact stopped on that same ul. Rębielską. But we were forced to leave quickly, as the bus we were travelling on was disturbing the traffic. To my great sorrow, due to the lack of time, I was unable to locate the house where my grandfather and father had lived. This pained me to the utmost.

¹ [TN: Viz. immigrated to Palestine.]

My Grandfather, Mojsze Chaskelewicz

Regarding my grandfather, my father's father, I knew very little. My father did not have enough time to tell me about him. He passed away in 1952 when he was forty-six, as I mentioned, and I was only six years old.

Mrs Pe'eri described my grandfather as a man impressive in appearance and with a respectable bearing. He was a corpulent man with an impressive double chin and was therefore nicknamed by all "Mojsze *Goyischer*" [Gentile-like].

My mother Miriam sometimes told me that my grandfather had stood at the head of the town's Fire Brigade - an important and very responsible position, which commanded great respect. My grandfather marched at the head of every ceremonial procession held in Krzepice, leading his impressively and immaculately dressed colleagues.



The Fire Brigade - my grandfather Mojsze sits third from the left, and Monic sits fourth from the right

The fact that he was chosen for the position bears testimony to his status - one that was not easily granted to a Jewish citizen in Krzepice, where the majority of the populace were Poles who were affiliated with the Catholic Church and where expressions of antisemitism were very common.

I look at the only picture in which my grandfather appears and I try to recognise him. He is doubtlessly one of the two sitting in the front row, in the middle, surrounded by the group of firemen, some of whom are holding the musical instruments which they used in the colourful parades, in the celebration of national events and holidays which were celebrated in Krzepice and in the entire region.

I look at the photo once more. Near my grandfather sits another of the town's worthies - his surname is Monic². I recognise him easily - he was my father's friend. For many years, Monic had served as head of the Committee of Krzepice Jews in Israel.

Monic left a great impression on me in my childhood due to his great activism for the Krzepice *landsleit*. He did everything, within his power, to immortalise the memory of those who perished. He and his wife were very popular with the Krzepice *landsleit* in Israel and abroad.

Monic was childless. With his death, he took with him a great deal of information - and the documents he had in his possession, which could have aided me greatly. I tried to find out to whom they were passed on, but to no avail.

My [paternal] grandmother, for some reason, was not mentioned. No one stated her name, nor did anyone mention my father's first wife. I later discovered that her name had been Chana, *née* Lachman. My father Majer married her before the Second World War and they had two boys - Abram and Ruben. All three - mother and boys - perished. I found these details out later on.



² [TN: Pronounced "Monitz."]