

My Memories

One glorious, beautiful summer day in 1914, my grandfather, Mendel Preger, came home from Myszków on foot, surprised and quite startled. He told us that, not having been able to secure a cart in Myszków, he had set out homewards on foot. Along the way, two fully-armed German soldiers, with Wilhelm helmets¹ on their heads, had caught up with him. They stopped him and inquired of him whether it was still far to Żarki. The soldiers were riding two huge, powerful horses and they, themselves, looked tall and heroic.

“It appears that we’ve got a war”, Grandfather told all those who had gathered in our home.

As in Żarki the “wireless telephone” [viz. word of mouth] functioned very well, soon all the neighbours from the courtyard flocked to us and my grandfather did not grow weary of telling [people] how the German soldiers looked and what they had asked him.

Mane’le Fajner and Jojneson Rubinsztajn argued over how long such a war could last. The rest of the crowd, such as Icze-Duwid the baker, Chaim-Joel the brush-maker, Janke’le Kenigsberg and Awigdor Fajner listened and sometimes threw in a word. The women stood to one side, sighing. Among them, I remember Fajgla Krycek [??²], Surka the butcher’s wife and Dwojra the midwife.

Suddenly, a noise was heard from the street - the two German horsemen had arrived. They rode past the front of Lajzerowicz’s house and entered ul. Leśniowska.

Fear fell upon the *shtetl*. So it was war, after all.

This occurred on the first day of the First World War. No newspaper wrote that the War had yet broken out but, in Żarki, we were already seeing German soldiers, due to the town’s proximity to the German border - about fourteen kilometres.

I remember that also, on 1st September 1939 when the Second World War broke out, Żarki was among the first towns to be bombarded and already, on that first day of the War, many victims fell. I was then reminded - I myself do not know why - of those two German soldiers from the First World War, whom I still recall so vividly, that I could just draw their [portraits].

It could be that my fear of those German soldiers, in 1914, was the presentiment of a child’s heart. That had been the beginning of the end. And, even though the end only came 25 years later, it nevertheless came through German soldiers.

In the times of the First World War, Żarki suffered extensively. At the start of 1915, when the German Army retreated and once more neared the German border, a large part of the German Army concentrated behind Żarki, where they established battle positions. For six weeks, Żarki was in the central [line of] fire. The cannons shot over the *shtetl*.

A German officer, with a whole squad of soldiers, was billeted in our dwelling. Every day at sundown, the cannonade would commence. The officer would then produce a mandolin and play it, singing,

¹ [TN: The spiked helmets worn by the troops of Kaiser Wilhelm II, which are known as “Pickelhaube.”]

² [TN: קריצק in the Yiddish original; it is unclear whether this was a surname or a nickname.]

“Every thrust - one Frenchman; every shot - one Russian³.” And he would add, laughing, “How well the cannon play!”

Our childhood was hard and sad. At the time when children play and study, we had war, shelling, famine, and diseases.

We studied at *cheder* - both boys and girls. My *Rebbe* [viz. teacher] was Szaja Piski⁴. The *Żarki landsleit* [surely] must remember him - a small, thin Jew, with red, purulent eyes. Girls and boys studied separately. From the boys’ corner, I can still hear, in my ears, the echo of the chant, “*Vayoimer Moishe - hot Moishe gezugt...*”⁵ The girls learnt how to pray, to write in Yiddish and to do sums⁶. In the wintertime, it was very cold in the *cheder*. All the children had frozen feet. Two women also lived in Szaja Piski’s impoverished house. These were the pious Kajla and the blind Mala.

The blind Mala was always cheerful and laughed very heartily. I could not comprehend how a sightless person could be so happy. She knew the whole town, from small to great, and never passed up any joyous or mournful occasion in the *shtetl*. She was a lively messenger - she carried all the news over from house to house.

The pious Kajla prayed all day long. She only tore herself away from prayer when she went out to town to collect donations for honourable⁷ poor people. The girls in *cheder* assisted her. I think that the one who helped her the most was Balcia Szprynger. In my memory, I always see her with the Hebrew book under her arm, going to [Kopel] Minc⁸ for her Hebrew lesson.

Balcia would also collect money for the old scribe. Every Thursday, she would hand the money over to the scribe’s wife, for her to have what to make *Shabbes*⁹ with.

I, too, was one of the pious Kajla’s helpers. Every Friday morning, I received money from her, which I took to various honourable poor folk.

The War drew on and *Żarki* found itself under Austrian occupation. The children received a one-classroom school of sorts, next to the *gmina* [Jewish *Kehilla* Centre]. The Austrian eagle was hung up in the classroom and we learnt the “royal and imperial” Austrian anthem. Our monarch was Franz Joseph. But this did not last long.

One day, I saw the Pole Biernacki go up to an Austrian soldier and take his rifle and revolver from him. I could not comprehend why the soldier was handing his weapons over in such manner to Biernacki, without putting up any resistance. But my mother explained to me that, from that day forth, Poland would stand as a sovereign nation and that the Austrians would be going away.

³ [TN: These words rhyme in the original German.]

⁴ [TN: Mentioned above on p.38.]

⁵ [TN: “And Moses said...”, first in the biblical Hebrew, and then translated to Yiddish; these are typical opening words for a passage of Scripture which the boys would have been taught.]

⁶ [TN: Especially in the old days, girls were not taught any form of Torah in the religious schools, as they are exempt from the dictate to engage in Torah study.]

⁷ [TN: In the context of a religious community, this term would have included erudite Torah scholars and religious personalities who were highly respected as such, but who often had no source of income, and also respected members of the community who had once been wealthy but had fallen upon hard times.]

⁸ [TN: See above, pp.57-59, regarding the teacher Kopel Minc.]

⁹ [TN: Yiddish expression, “*machen Shabbes*,” which includes all the preparations that were made (mainly by the womenfolk) to welcome the “Sabbath Queen” into the home: shopping, cooking, laundering, cleaning, etc., etc.]



The Jewish populace participate in the national Polish celebrations

Celebrations ensued. At the polling places, at the [Tadeusz] Kościuszko monument [and] on the walls at school - a Polish eagle had already been hung up and, once more, we learnt a new anthem - "*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*" [Poland has not yet perished].

Very soon, however, the new power began to be felt. The *Hallerczykes*¹⁰ arrived. One began to hear about attacks on Jews [and] about them being thrown off the trains. And this brings to mind another event which my grandfather Mendel experienced.

In that time, he was once travelling home to Myszków from Będzin. *Hallerczykes* came onto the coach and sprang upon him with a shout, "*Jakąż piękną brodę masz , Żydzie!*" [What a beautiful beard you have, Jew!] and plucked out bits of his beard. They put their knives to his throat and threatened to kill him. Grandfather came home bleeding and in a bad state.

As always, all his good friends immediately ran up together to hear what he had experienced and to console him as far as possible. The first to come was Sandel¹¹ the *melamed* - a tall, dark Jew with a red kerchief [hanging from] his caftan pocket.

"Praised be God, Mendel, that we see each other", he cried out. "Only do not be overwhelmed! A Jew needs to have broad shoulders. We'd better drink *le'chaim*..."

Szломke Tenenbaum¹², Reb Szlojme'le Kon¹³ and many others also came. Szломke Tenenbaum was a friend from my grandfather's youth. I remember how they would often reminisce about the long road they had made, when they travelled to Trisk [Turisk] to bring the *Rebbe* to Żarki.

Reb Szlojme'le Kon was a thin Jew with a white beard. Two stern eyes gleamed in his face. He was a great *ben-Torah*. I was very much afraid of him. This is perhaps due to the fact that, whenever he

¹⁰ [TN: The troops of Lieutenant General Józef Haller von Hallenburg of the Polish Army, who leaned with the *Endecja* Movement, and perpetrated pogroms against Jews.]

¹¹ [TN: Mentioned above on p.38.]

¹² [TN: His brief biography may be seen above on p.62.]

¹³ [TN: Mentioned above, p.63.]

came to our house, a commotion immediately broke out and they shouted, "Women to the side, women to the side!"

I loved listening to their conversations and stories, very often about the olden days.

One of these stories has remained sharp in my memory. It is the tale of why Żarki was not connected to the railway and one had to slog seven kilometres in a cart over to Myszków if one needed to travel on the train.

This is how the story goes:

When the first railway line in Poland was being built - the so-called "Warsaw-Vienna Railway¹⁴" - the train was supposed to pass near Żarki. There was much talk of this in the *shtetl*. People were glad that the traffic of trains would make life easier.

But, in the *shtetl*, there was an extremely energetic woman, who ran a large shop. She feared that, should there be a railway station in Żarki, people would travel to buy goods in the larger cities and she would lose clients. This lady was Motl Frymer's grandmother.

Without many deliberations, she quickly went around to the engineers and, although it cost her a high sum of money, she achieved that the rails should be laid a little further away from Żarki. Thus Żarki was left, sadly, without a railway station.

I do not know to what extent this story is true. But often, as I travelled in the cart to Myszków, I mused on the destiny of the *shtetl* Żarki, which was not fortunate enough to receive its own railway station.

Żarki was one of the oldest towns in the region. Żarki lay upon a very ancient Polish trail, the so-called "Trail of the Thirteen Eagles¹⁵" - meaning the thirteen castles which lay along the route from Częstochowa to Kraków. Behind Żarki, there are also the ruins of a castle on a hilltop, around which a beautiful view spreads.

Not far from Żarki is the renowned region of Żłoty Potok, which is often mentioned in Polish literature, with Count [Edward Aleksander] Raczyński's palace. That same palace had once belonged to one of Poland's greatest poets - Count Zygmunt Krasiński.

While all the *shtetls* in the region, which were near the railway line, developed into large industrial towns, Żarki still remained a little *shtete'le* - and it was all because one woman had been stubborn.

As said, Żarki is in beautiful environs, surrounded by woods and fields all around. One grove, which was next to the only factory in Żarki, was called the "Dance Bridge." There, we used to promenade on summery Saturday afternoons. One could find the entire *shtetl* there then. Groups of young people strolled back and forth, crossing the crooked tree over the water - that is how one jumped from the "Dance Bridge" into the Kozięglowy forest. Some groups sat on the grass, reading books, exchanging views, singing, and sometimes also dancing. The "Dance Bridge" brought more than one couple together.

Among the Saturday walks, there were also outings to Leśniów - in the Leśniów wood or to the Leśniów spring. The wood was a lush pine forest. There, we used to encounter many folk who came

¹⁴ [TN: In Russian in the original.]

¹⁵ [TN: Otherwise known as Szlak Orlich Gniazd, or The Trail of the Eagle's Nests.]

from the surrounding localities to stay during the summer. This was interesting for us. It seemed to us as if these people were bringing to us in the *shtetl* greetings from the faraway greater world, for which our youth in Żarki yearned so strongly.

If one was already in Leśniów, one needed to drink a little water from the spring. This was a source which sprang continuously from the ground. The water was crystal-clear, very refreshing and tasted wonderful - I think I have never drunk a tastier beverage. Different legends were told of this spring. The water was said to have wonderful qualities - improving the appetite for food, healing sick eyes and other such things.

From Leśniów, we would sometimes run round to the cliffs in Przewodyszowice. We would climb them up [to the top] and, from there, we admired the whole surrounding region.

After such a Saturday, we were tired enough. On Sunday, normal weekday life started once more - until Wednesday.

Wednesday was an important day in the *shtetl* - market day. What tumult, what noise! The quiet little *shtetl* turned lively. From all directions, carts came with farmers and their wives. The marketplace was flooded with products.

I think Żarki could be called a *shtetl* of craftsmen. Most of the inhabitants were craftsmen - tanners, cobblers, shoe-stitchers¹⁶ [and] tailors - all productive people [and] not idlers or ones who conduct *luft gesheftn*¹⁷ - an honest, laborious *shtetl* was our Żarki.

We started working very early, almost as children. Whole families sat at the worktable, parents and children. And, when were the children supposed to study? Only in the evening, of course, and alone - without a teacher. "Studying", often times, meant becoming acquainted with the world, history [and] literature by reading books, and with politics and other subjects through newspapers.

Żarki youth had no lack of books. I am convinced that few *shtetls* in Poland had libraries as wealthy and interesting as the one in Żarki. We must remember that the Żarki library was founded by the owner of the famous Szybel publishing house. Szybel was a native of Żarki. The library was established at his initiative and with his aid and it was managed by the Zionist "Ezra" organisation.

All Żarki youth would come together in this library. Here, we studied, discussed [different topics], discovered new worlds - and also flirted a little.

And what more can one do, when one is young?

All my friends - girls and boys - from those years, who are no longer among us - I hereby commemorate with a deep sigh and reverential awe.

Szajndla Preger-Tajtelbaum

¹⁶ [TN: A craftsman in shoemaking who makes the uppers.]

¹⁷ [TN: Lit. "air business (deals)", viz. speculative ventures based on hot air.]