

Letters to a dead Jewish boy

Henio Żytomirski was nine years old when murdered in the extermination camp at Majdanek in 1942. 60 years later the children in his hometown Lublin have started writing letters for him and sending them to the last address of his family in the ghetto. The initiators of this commemoration project are Polish Christians, people who knew nothing at all about the Holocaust when they were young

"It's a pity we no longer live near by. I miss you, I miss you so much, and I send you a painting where one can see how I give you a letter and you give me flowers. Answer me if you have liked my letter. I am waiting. 122 kisses, Gabrysia."

A girl writes a letter to a boy. The boy is eight years old, so is the girl. He's a head taller than her. She has ribbons in her braids. At the background painted a broken heart, a butterfly and cats. It is a cheerful painting in red colors. The girl had even added a date, March 1941, as if they had lived at the same time sharing common experiences.

This is one of the thousands of letters that were sent between 2005 and 2007 to Henio Żytomirski, the boy from the painting, at 11 Kowalska Street in Lublin. But those letters have not reached Henio. They were returned to the senders with the post stamp: 'Unknown Recipient'.

Henio Żytomirski doesn't live there anymore. He doesn't live anywhere. On 9th of November 1942 he was sent to the gas chambers in Majdanek. A nine years old boy went to his death completely alone. Kowalska Street was his last address in Lublin Ghetto.

A well, a streetlamp, stones

"Dear Henio, me myself don't understand why I write to a dead child. There were a lot of differences between your childhood and mine, but it seems to me that we could have found a common language. Your childhood friend, Alek Levitski."

In 2001 Neta Żytomirski-Avidar had packed a suitcase and went to travel Poland. Żytomirski-Avidar, a painter from Netanya, had put among the clothes some pictures and old letters of her family. She had travelled together with her friends - Second Generation and members of the Lublin Jewish Community Organization in Israel. During the visit to Lublin she had met Tomasz (Tomek) Pietrasiewicz and Witold (Vitek) Dąbrowski, directors of "Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN" (Town's Gate - No Name Theatre); This institution is a local culture center, dealing mainly with preservation and restoration of Jewish Lublin heritage.

She herself was born in Kibbutz Amir less than three months after her cousin Henio's death. Her father, Yehuda (Leon) Zytomirski, was the only one of his family who had come to Israel before the war and was rescued; Henio's father, Shmuel, was his big brother. "I met Tomek and Vitek. They had asked me if at home I had pictures, letters and documents of my family," says Zytomirski-Avidar. "I had returned home and decided to accept the challenge."

Being a skilled former school teacher, out of the photographs she had Neta created a presentation of Henio's short life. She added the letters exchange (which during the war had lasted for four years, from 1939 until 1943) between her father and his brother and sent „an album” to Lublin. One of the pictures in that album was taken on 5th of July 1939, two months before the opening of Second World War. Henio, six years old, stands there at the entrance of a building (PKO Bank); He is dressed elegantly and smiles.

That was Henio's last photograph which arrived to Israel together with a letter in Hebrew that his father sent. "In two months Henio will begin visiting 'Tarbut' School, and he is already riding two wheels. Everyone who sees him thinks he is terribly mischievous, and for me he is unique and so cute. I'm sending you his last picture." The father didn't know then what a terrible meaning the word 'last' would have.

Tomek Pietrasiewicz, 50, was grown up in Lublin. Before the war a third of Lublin's population was Jewish, but his parents had never mentioned Jews or the Holocaust. As a child this subject had never occupied him, except once.

"At elementary school I had an old teacher. One day she got very angry and told us a story:

There was a nine years old boy in her village. During the war a German soldier took him out of the house and led him through the main street of the village until the boy's hair had turned white.

She told us that dramatic story in order to cool us down.

"It had an enormous impression over me. Not because he was Jewish, but because of the white hair. After I had already started dealing with Jewish subjects, I returned to my classmates and asked them if they remember the story. None of them did. I have understood I'm the last person who remembers that boy, and should I not do something with that – no one would know this child was ever alive."

He had completed his studies for M.Sc. Degree in Theoretical Physics and was a member of an avant-garde theatre students group. The group had several forms and changes, and on 1992 it had been shaped and moved to its current dwelling place at Brama Grodzka - the historical border between the Christian town inside the walls and the Jewish town. The Jews had used to live around the King's Palace, at the other side of the town's gate. At the Second World War the Jews were forced to enter the ghetto, and the Germans had blown up all of the Jewish quarter. Today only one well, one streetlamp and few stones are remnants of the Jewish town.

A park was built over a big part of the former Jewish town. The gate is a wide Middle Ages structure with arches and stairways going up and down in all directions. Pietrasiewicz, the director of the theatre group, added Dąbrowski the musician; Together they had looked for artistic contents to the theatre. "We had asked ourselves what was here before, who sat in this structure. One thing led to another and finally we have found out that once Jews had been living here," says Dąbrowski.

„Till 1989 things like that were not mentioned here at all. Lublin was a town with no history. In old guides of the town was written that 'also Jews had lived in Lublin', while actually 42,000 Jews had lived here.

Here there were more than hundred prayer houses and more than ten synagogues, including the Great Synagogue of the Maharshal which at Yom Kippur had contained 3,000 prayers. Here there were newspapers and theatres, Jewish boys had fallen in love with Christian girls and on the contrary, but here was also one of the biggest death camps – Majdanek. For me it was a great discovery to find out that most of the people who were murdered there, 60,000 out of 79,000, were Jews.”

One day Pietrasiewicz had looked toward the non-existent town and decided: These silent souls would get their lives back. "This is my destiny," he says, "a kind of a secret I have to reveal." Since then the center had turned to an institution for research and documentation of the Jewish history in Lublin. The place had been massively renovated. About 30 employees of the center collect recorded testimonies of survivors and their Polish neighbours about life before the war, curate photography exhibitions, restore streets and buildings, carry out seminars for teachers and visits for pupils, learn Yiddish songs and arrange Kabbalat Sabbath [a ceremony in order to welcome the Sabbath] for friends and for the thirty Jews living in Lublin. Halla [twist bread] is baked for them in a special bakery. They buy a Kosher wine, recite Kiddush [bless the wine], pray and sing Sabbath tunes.

Crying and remembering

"Dear Henio, I have never written a letter to a dead person, but I will try. Soon my brother will be eight years old, and it frightens me a little. You had died like many others, and because of what? Because you were Jewish or perhaps because you were Polish? It is necessary to make sure it will never repeat itself. Never again."

In 2001 Henio's pictures had come to the center from Israel. "They were lying down here and no one knew what to do with them," says Pietrasiewicz, "but suddenly I felt a sense of elevation and it was as if I were in a mission. For many years I hadn't wanted to deal with the Holocaust. All of a sudden, as sometimes a river tops its banks, I understood that no longer we can ignore the Holocaust. I had felt I had to do something with that.

"My childhood passed in a neighbourhood at the outskirts of the town, two kilometers from Majdanek. For me it was only a place full of horror and ghosts. When I have found Henio's pictures I understood it's a sign. Being a Physicist I shouldn't say it, but it's a fact. Suddenly I have felt

I want to do something for these children. The European Union had decided to give us some tens of thousands of euros for making an exhibition in Majdanek, and when we had got the money I decided I want to do something in memory of these children."

NN Theatre had built not one but two tombstones: An exhibition in Majdanek; and "Letters to Henio" project which carries out for the fourth consecutive year. The exhibition in Majdanek, 'Elementarz' (the Polish word for Primer: elementary book for teaching children to read), takes place at block 53 in Majdanek. It's dedicated to the children who were in the camp. "The first words children learn how to write are Ma, Dad, home, dog, cat," says Dąbrowski, "At Majdanek's Elementarz they learn words like order, crematorium, block, gas chamber, transport, number, camp and selection."

The second project had been started six years ago in an operation called "Letters to the Ghetto". School pupils in Lublin had written letters to children at their age and sent them to addresses in the ghetto. The letters were returned to the senders with the stamp: 'Unknown Name'. "We came into school classes and gave addresses to pupils at the age of twelve and thirteen. We have told them it relates to the Holocaust. Some of the writers wrote about themselves, a few letters contained blank pages, others wrote 'the teacher said to write, so I write' and some had written very personal and touching letters. More than a thousand letters were sent, including letters to Henio."

Three years ago the people at the center had decided to focus on one child, Henio, in order to make the victim more concrete. They have opened a website and published a booklet with photographs sent by Zytomirski-Avidar. Prior to this they have held study days for teachers and education staff; The participants had learnt about Henio's biography and dedicated special lessons for teaching the subject. On 19th of April 2005, Warsaw Ghetto Uprising anniversary and the Holocaust

Memorial Day in Poland, a special postbox for sending letters to Henio was set up at the entrance to PKO Bank – the place where Henio's last picture had been taken. The post authorities referred to the postbox as a regular box and had to deal with bags filled with thousands of letters that were returned back to their senders. On the same day there was a tour by foot following the addresses Henio had dwelled in, including his address at the ghetto. The day ended in a quiet prayer which was held beside the last streetlamp from the Jewish town.

On 2006 the project was done by the same pattern. On 2007 the pedestrians who were passing by had been asked to write the letters on the spot. Once again the compliance was remarkable. Since then Henio Zytomirski have become a symbol to the Holocaust not only in Lublin, but all over Poland. Today he is a part of the general education system. National and local press had dedicated many reports to him and to the project. School newspapers tell his story and try to understand the meaning of the Holocaust by it. For many of them that meaning was totally abstract.

"We have turned the theatre to a place where the history is told" say Pietrasiewicz and Dąbrowski. Today their theatre displays a one-man-show where Dąbrowski is the actor and

Pietrasiewicz is the director. The repertory includes stories taken from the Jewish folk tales treasure, songs in Yiddish and tales written by Jewish authors; The stories are accompanied by accordion. They travel all over Poland and visit various festivals in different countries. "It's an adventure for me, not a work," says Dąbrowski. "I work here a lot of hours a day, my job is my hobby. People in Lublin ask if only Jews work at our center, but none of us is a Jew."

Perhaps you have Jewish roots without knowing it?

"Ich bin a Goy mit a Yiddishe Neshume." (Yiddish: I'm a gentile with a Jewish soul)

So what are you actually doing here?

Pietrasiewicz: "Crying."

Dąbrowski: "And remembering."