

In Search of Myself

I was born during World War II in the small town of Stare Swięciany, near Vilnius (currently belonging to Lithuania). Before I started attending school, I had frequently seen my birth certificate stamped with a large Lithuanian seal. According to the certificate I was born on March 25, 1943. But when I went to school, the date was slightly different. Even though the year of my birth was the same, the month was altered: it was February 28. Naturally, I drew my parents' attention to that change but the answer that I heard from my father was: "You know, it was the war back then..."

I spent the years of elementary and high school in Pasłek, a town that was incorporated in the Olsztyn district in the past. I remained an only child until I was nine, and then my sister was born. My family home was a poor metal worker's home, whose wife took care of a small farm: we had a cow, several hens, and sometimes pigs that were slaughtered on the occasion of Christmas or Easter.

Both my childhood and early youth were very similar to those of my peers, though at the same time I was slightly different from my friends. I was a child of poor health, and also stuttered. Moreover, I was afraid of everything: geese, roosters, cows and especially mice. When I was playing with other children and a plane appeared in the sky, I fell to the ground at its sight. Children laughed at my behaviour but my mother explained: "Don't be scared, they do not drop bombs any more". I didn't understand what it meant "to drop bombs" but the moment I would hear the sound of the plane I clung to the ground instinctively.

I recall a certain event, which made a profound impression on me. I guess it was a beautiful July evening or late afternoon. (I wasn't attending school yet, so it might have been summertime in 1949). I was on my way home when all of a sudden two men, standing on the opposite side of the street yelled in my direction: "A Jew, Jewish 'bajstruk' (which means a foundling, a child without a father). I looked in their direction but they burst out laughing. I had no doubt this name was meant for me. But why did they shout: a 'Jew'? And why 'bajstruk'? I had a mummy and daddy who loved me very much!

Terrified and stuttering, I tried to explain to my mother what had actually happened. I sobbed bitterly and I was scared. My mother kept asking me: "Who were those people that called you names?" When I asked why they called me a 'Jew' and a 'foundling', she replied: "Good and wise people will not call you like that. And there is no need to listen to bad people".

From other difficult moments of my childhood I remember that I wasn't able to deal with the questions asked by my friends: "Who do you actually take after?" I resembled neither my father nor my mother. They had typically Polish, Slavic features - while I had dark curly hair and everything in my face was somehow different from my parents' appearance.

There is yet another memory connected with searching for traces of resemblance to my parents, which has affected me to a large degree. As it turned out later, it had also an influence on my mother's behaviour. It happened during the time when I already attended the fifth or sixth grade of my school. One day I was standing in front of a mirror and combing my hair. For a moment it seemed to me that I found in my face something that resembled my father's features and I burst out with the question: "Mum, look, I take after daddy, don't I?" But as my mother was an exceptionally truthful person, she did not confirm my 'discovery'. So this sudden question was followed by heavy silence... which I broke with an outcry - "Because if I'm a Jew, you'll see what I'll do to myself!!!" After a while I looked more deeply into that mirror and I saw tears in my mother's eyes. Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself. Even today I am ashamed at the words that I cried out that day.

In high school there weren't any problems. I was a good student. My parents were very proud of me. Adolescents do not pose questions like: "Who do you take after?" Nobody called me a Jew in high school.

My parents were devout believers. We prayed together and I regularly accompanied them in attending Sunday mass. I had been an altar boy since kindergarten and since I can recall - I've always wanted to be a priest. I enjoyed being in church very much. More than other things I remember the priest walking among people with a small basket and them throwing coins into it. When I also threw some money the priest would always pat my head gently. In the times of my early childhood it was my biggest religious experience.

However, in high school my enthusiasm subsided, and in the final grade it seemed to me that God was no longer needed. Anyway, my 'heaven' was set on fire. Although I never revealed to my parents any signs of rebellion connected with my wavering faith I stopped thinking about becoming a priest.

Then suddenly, a few weeks before my final exams, while I was walking along the street with my catechist, I told him - or rather let it slip - that I would probably enter a seminary as soon as I graduated from high school. Just when I said that I got scared of my own words. That very evening I repeated the thing I'd said to the priest to my parents. And there came a total surprise! My father, who hardly ever missed a Sunday mass, who was extremely tired as he laboured very hard -

who never went to sleep without having knelt down to his prayers first, instead of revealing joy that his son would become a priest, started mocking me.

"You? A priest? And what are we going to do with all the girls that our house is so full of?" He was right, I always had lots of friends, I used to play an accordion, and while I was still in high school, I never missed a party.

Nevertheless, I was very surprised with the attitude of my father who acknowledged my intention of becoming a priest with such a great dose of reserve, even unwillingness. On the other hand, it seemed that it was my father's approach that actually spurred me to go to the seminary despite any obstacles. My father was visibly discontent with my decision. My mother never said a word about it. I saw her stealthily wiping tears. When I asked her why she was crying she would reply that women sometimes behaved that way. Nevertheless, there was neither encouragement nor criticism on her part.

On September 15, 1960 I entered the seminary in Olsztyn. Suddenly, on October 20 my father died. This was a genuine shock for me especially as he had just visited me in the seminary on the Sunday before the aforementioned date. What is more, he appeared to be reconciled with the whole situation. However, something, which makes me unsettled to this very day, took place. During his visit we both went to an empty seminary chapel. On the major wall there was a large picture devoted to the Virgin Mary (this painting has been revered in Vilnius. Stare Swięciany, where I was born and where my parents lived during World War II is located near Vilnius).

Just when he entered the chapel with me, my father knelt down and started to cry. I felt confused. When we left the chapel I asked him why he was crying? Was he feeling unwell? Was he troubled by anything? He replied that he felt fine and was not worried. He told me his tears were his own affair and said that I shouldn't take them personally. This happened on Sunday and on the following Thursday around 7 p.m. I received a phone-call informing me that my father had died of heart attack.

My first reaction was the urge to escape from the seminary. It seemed to me that I was guilty of my father's death. He didn't want me to become a priest. I acted against his will. His behaviour in the chapel was a message that was totally inexplicable for me. After my father's funeral, when I told my mother that perhaps I should not return to the seminary, she reacted very strongly. She said: "You should not blame yourself for your father's death. If you find your studies too hard, then you will come back, but you must not resign from school because of what happened."

After I arrived at the seminary I revealed my doubts to the rector. He said that I was in a heavy shock and in such a condition I shouldn't decide about leaving, if I still wanted to quit after a month I would be allowed to do it.

However, after this time passed, I decided that the whole situation was actually the reason

for which I should not leave. And it wasn't my private affair any more. It already 'cost' the death of my father so I had to prove to him that my decision was made in earnest. If my father was afraid that I would be a bad priest it was up to me to prove that I could be a good one. And thus I decided to stay.

The years in the seminary passed very fast. There weren't any major problems concerning my studies, my colleagues or myself. Everything indicated that I would become a priest...

At the fifth year of theological studies there is usually an announcement in a home parish informing that such and such a candidate is about to be ordained. On that occasion, anybody who is familiar with any facts preventing the candidate from being ordained is obliged to inform the rector about it. After some time when this information was announced in every parish, the rector summoned all of us. While I went there absolutely calm, I left his room utterly shaken. Right at the very beginning of our conversation the rector told me that there were serious suspicions that I had not been baptized. Suddenly I felt dizzy... Who could not have been baptized if not a Jew? Maybe I was a Jew after all? I asked the rector how he had obtained such information? My godmother was still living. Also, I knew precisely who my godfather was. Besides, at home I frequently heard about my baptism, which took place on Easter, in 1943. I asked the rector - what data precisely he had on my subject. He said he didn't have anything, and refused to comment further on the subject. Even though those were only suspicions, he wanted me to agree to receive a so called 'conditional baptism'. I dismissed this suggestion. I said that agreeing to the conditional baptism would offend my parents who were decent people and would never lie to me. Besides, I had my First Communion, I received the sacrament of confirmation - how would it be possible without baptism? In the end, I asked the rector to agree to meet my godmother so she could cast away all doubts. This plan soon came to pass and the whole affair subsided.

On June 19, 1966 I was ordained during the millenium ceremony in Warmia diocese, in Frombork Basilica. From August of that year I started to work in Kwidzyn, in the parish of the Holy Trinity. I worked there for a year. Once, a taxi-driver, that took me to a sick person, asked me if I was aware of the fact that people called me a Jew. I asked him back if HE was aware of the fact that Jesus was also a Jew. The dialogue was broken at this stage. Although I didn't feel pleased at all, I wasn't afraid of Jews any longer, I wasn't even afraid that I might be one of them. The Bible, which I read and studied in the seminary, drew me closer to the Jewish world. The closeness of Jesus from Nazareth was the closeness of a Jew for me.

In 1968 I was sent to Lublin to do a degree in philosophy at the Catholic University there. After graduating I stayed at the university and I have worked there up to the present moment. In 1975 both my mother and sister came to Lublin to live with me. Though very discreetly, the problem of "Jewishness" still accompanied me. Once, one of my colleagues told me that he heard I was an orphan saved from the transport of Jews taken to Majdanek. I kept asking about the source

of this information but he refused to say anything else.

During this particular time I read a lot of so called 'camp literature' and Jewish memoirs from the World War II. The thought that I might possibly be a Jewish child torn from death matured gradually inside me. I tried to speak with my mother about it but she would never keep up this subject. Rather, she invariably changed it, which was a sign that there must have been something to it. So I tried to talk about the years of the war, about the place of my birth. I raised numerous detailed questions. But the moment I asked about Jews, the conversation was abruptly over. I noticed a couple of times she was wiping tears. One day I abruptly stopped reading and asked her directly - "Mom, why are you crying? Am I a Jew?" Instead of an answer I heard a question which she cried out loudly: "Don't I love you enough?" This moment I also started to cry. I was not able to read any longer. Although not really an answer, this said enough. I learned nearly everything in 1978. My mother was briefly hospitalized because of what was suspected to be cancer. She must have felt that she would die soon. She lived eleven years longer though; she died on April 15 in 1989.

Still, our crucial conversation took place on Thursday, February 23, 1978. During our dinner we talked about Stare Swiecziany from the war period. I mentioned some familiar streets, names, and then once again I asked about Jews, that is, if she knew any of them during the war. Then my mother broke down in tears. I took her hands and kissed them explaining that she should tell me the whole truth. These were the most beautiful moments of her life and they also hid the truth about my life. I was explaining that I was mature enough to endure the truth, and that I would manage to cope with it. Then for the first time I heard: "You had wonderful parents. They loved you very much. They were Jews who were murdered. I only saved you from a similar death."

We were both crying and the world changed around me. While remaining myself, I was becoming somebody else. I asked my mother about my 'real' name - but she didn't know it. She didn't want to remember the name, as it would have been too dangerous. Somebody might have denounced us to the Germans, which could result in persecution. And thus, not knowing my surname, she could always say: 'He is my child and I love him'. This was how my mother explained this. But why didn't she want me to find out the truth? Why was she hiding it from me? Then she reminded me of that day in front of the mirror, and my cry that if I were a Jew I would do something to myself. She said, "I love you no matter what and I have never wanted you to hurt yourself because of that." This evening I heard something that was the most significant thing for me; the explanation of my father's death and my priesthood.

My Polish mother wanted to adopt a child during the war years. She even considered taking a Jewish orphan but she was afraid to do that. My Polish parents didn't have their own flat; they only rented a room from a family. Keeping a Jewish child in such conditions was very difficult, and most of all, dangerous. Being discovered hiding a Jew was tantamount to capital punishment.

I didn't ask about the circumstances in which my Polish mother had come across my Jewish family. Anyway, my Jewish mother used arguments that appealed to the Christian values of my Polish mother. As the latter declared herself to be a devout believer, my Jewish mother told her: "You emphasize the fact that you are a Christian, and that you believe in Jesus. He was a Jew. So try to save this Jewish baby for the Jew in whom you believe. And one day he will grow up to be a priest, and he will teach other people."

I heard my heart pounding in my chest. I had been a priest for twelve years already and was thirty-five at that time - at that moment I felt that I was born once again, and that I was returning to myself. I understood the tears of my Polish father in the seminary chapel. It must have been difficult for him to believe that the prophecy of a terrified Jewish woman, who wanted to save her child from death, would be fulfilled in this way, in this child's life. Definitely, these words remain very precious for me also: they are the words of the Jewish mother in her son's life, who is a Catholic priest.??? It was the beginning of my inward journey.

My Polish mother was familiar with the fact that my Jewish father was a tailor, actually a very good one, that being the reason for Germans keeping him alive until 1943 as he worked for them. Moreover, my Polish mother remembered that I also had a brother named Samuel.

How could I discover other details? Maybe they survived? Perhaps my brother was still living, and most of all, what was my real name? These were the questions, which unsettled me. I was afraid to speak about my problem with anybody. However, in certain peculiar circumstances, I confided all this to a nun named Sister Klara Jaroszyńska, about whom I knew that she had saved many Jews during the war and who had numerous contacts in Israel. This was how my correspondence with Israel started although I didn't receive much response at that time. There were too many cases that were similar to mine.

In the meantime my Polish mother died in my hands in 1989.

In 1992 the aforementioned Sister Klara went to Israel. Somebody suggested that perhaps a meeting of Jews from Stare Swi[^]ciany who survived the war could be arranged. This was a very good idea indeed. Soon it turned out that I was the son of Jacob and Batia Weksler and I had a brother, Samuel. None of them survived the war, although my father's brother (Zwi Weksler) and sister (Rachel Sargowicz, her maiden name Weksler) lived in Israel in Nethanya in 1992. (Rachel actually still lives there.)

I went to Israel the same year. I was received with great affection and tears. My uncle who was a deeply devout Jew could not cope with the fact that I was a Catholic priest but finally he accepted it.

I wanted my parents to be rewarded with the 'Medal for the Righteous in the World' and I immediately started the procedure. It wasn't easy - although my parents saved a child from a Jewish family, did they save a Jew? Despite all the difficulties, this time it was my Jewish father's brother

who helped me a great deal. He said: "He is a Catholic priest but he loves Jews, he has a great affection for his mother and father, as he has for his Jewish family". The fact that I was circumcised had crucial significance in this case

In Yad Vashem, in 1995 I personally unveiled the memorial plate devoted to my Polish parents. My sister received the Medal that her parents were awarded with.

In my ID there are my Jewish father's and mother's names - Jacob and Batia.

In Poland, there is a clear distinction between nationality and citizenship. The blank space devoted to the latter I've filled with the word: 'POLISH'. As I wasn't sure what I should write in the blank with 'nationality' I asked a clerk what he would advise me to do, just to put him to the test. He replied: "You are a Catholic priest so you must be Polish." I asked then: "And who were my parents?" He responded: "Jews". So I wrote - Nationality: JEWISH.

This is how while living in Poland and being a Catholic priest I am of Jewish nationality. Reconciliation of those facts would be impossible for me to achieve in Israel. Thus, my Polish parents saved something of the Jew within me...

R. J. Weksler-Waszkinel