



THE JOURNEY TO POLISH CITIZENSHIP



• ORIT ARFA

The subject line read: “Good news from Warsaw!” My heart fluttered. I assumed that meant that my application to receive Polish citizenship was approved. Indeed it was:

“Your Polish citizenship certificate has come through – congrats! Where would you like it sent to please? And do you have this BC [birth certificate] attached ready in hard copy so we can do Step 2?”

The email came from the Melbourne-based Krystyna Duszniak, director of Lost Histories, a small business that specializes in Polish citizenship applications. I should have been happy, but I was annoyed. No, not because now I had to face a certain guilt over actually becoming a citizen in the country that caused my grandparents tremendous suffering, but because I still need to send more documents.

The first email I ever sent to Duszniak inquiring about her services was on April 26, 2018. The “good news” came 167 emails later, on December 20, 2018 – just before Christmas, as she predicted.

I would have never imagined I’d seek Polish citizenship. My paternal grandparents, both Holocaust survivors, never had anything good to say about Poland. My grandfather complained in open letters he wrote for posterity about the antisemitism he faced there as a youth. America became their beloved, adopted country, although they were also fierce Zionists.

However, after living in Germany for two years and visiting Poland several times in the interim, I came to realize that Poland and Europe as a whole are part of my identity, although I’d be kidding myself if I said I had any sentimental attachment to the country (even though my trips to Warsaw were fascinating and very tasty). Like most Israelis and Jews taking this step, I simply wanted to be able to live and work in Europe without continually renewing my visa.

EVER SINCE Poland became part of the European Union in 2004, applications for Polish citizenship have gone up, says Stanley Diamond, a retired businessman who in 1996 founded Jewish Records Indexing – Poland (www.jri-poland.org) as a first step to help families map their family histories to prevent the passing of genetic traits that might endanger future generations. JRI-Poland has digitally catalogued and indexed more than 5.7 million birth, marriage and death registrations from more than 550 Polish towns. Since then, it has become a portal for Jews of Polish descent looking to track down their ancestors and unknown relatives – and more recently, documents for obtaining Polish citizenship.



AT A post-war memorial.

“In terms of the potential of having that passport, not only for yourself but for your children and your children’s children, in many cases it’s priceless,” Diamond said. “Having such a passport provides Jews with both economic opportunity and an ‘insurance policy’ in times of political unrest.”

What often begins as a transaction undertaken mostly for pragmatic reasons invariably turns into a process of discovering more about the lives and pathways of ancestors. The process of seeking Polish citizenship involves the collection of many documents through digital archives, dusted-off family documents, and municipal registries. These include birth certificates, naturalization certificates and marriage certificates. The chain of eligibility must be proven three generations back, and it doesn’t matter whether the applicant has ever stepped into Poland.

By requesting and digging through documents received from the German-based International Tracing Service, a government archive that assists victims of World War II and their descendants in finding war-related documents, I discovered logs of my grandparents’ movement to ghettos, concentration camps, displaced persons camps and, ultimately, the ship that brought them to America. Concomitantly, I began transcribing my grandfather’s “open letters” about his experiences as a Polish-born Holocaust survivor.

JERUSALEM RESIDENT Gili Bruner began the process the other way around: she started the discovery process first to uncover secrets left by her father. Later, she realized the benefits of citizenship for her children as they approached college age.

After her Polish father died, he left her and her siblings a cryptic note, in a nylon folder along with his Polish passport and aliyah [Israel immigration] certificate, which her mother discovered upon cleaning out the house. It contained a Polish address.

“A small note. Three copies, addressed to each sibling,” Bruner, a high school teacher, said over the phone from her Jerusalem home. “It drove us crazy. How could a man who doesn’t talk about Poland send us a letter with a Polish address? It was forbidden for us to talk about Poland.”

Her quest to discover what this mysterious address was about brought her to Anat Shem-Or, Duszniak’s Israeli partner. What happened at that Polish location still remains a mystery, but Bruner realized that now was as good a time as any to redeem Polish citizenship for her family.

“Today, many young people really want to do it, and not just for the sake of living abroad,” Bruner said. “It’s very expensive for them in Israel. Parents must help their children who are students, and it’s hard for students to find good work.”

Shem-Or, a former hi-tech executive, came into the Polish

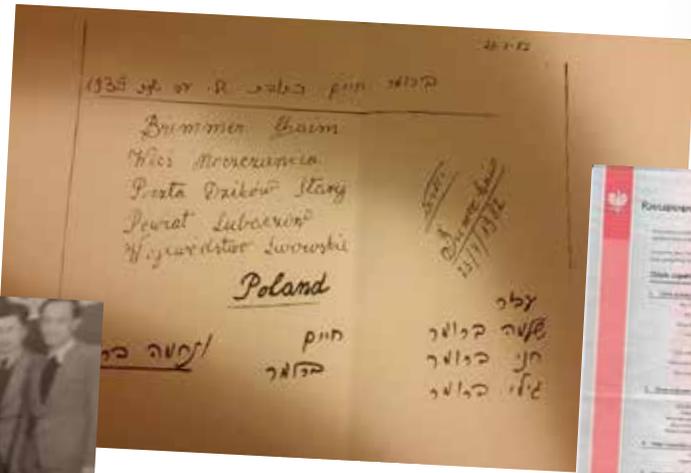


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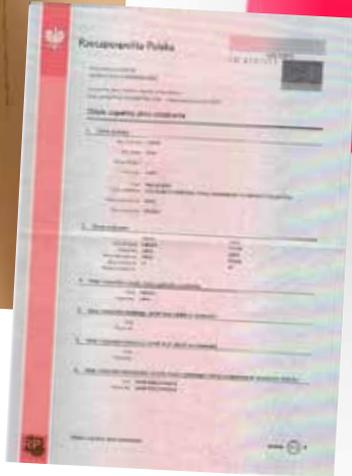
HENRYK AND Hanna Arfa, the writer’s grandparents, after the war. (Orit Arfa)

ISRAELI SPECIALIST in Polish citizenship Anat Shem-Or (as a child) with her brother and father after the war. (Photos: Courtesy)

SHEM-OR’S MATERNAL grandmother, Sara, a Holocaust survivor.



THE CRYPTIC note left by Gili Bruner's Polish father.



POLISH BIRTH certificate of the writer's grandfather, acquired during the process. (Orit Arfa)



citizenship business after undergoing the process herself. Along with her siblings, she inquired into her eligibility, but Israeli lawyers who deal with Polish citizenship told her that she was ineligible since her father had served in the Israel army. Polish law forbids Polish citizenship for any male who served in a foreign army (Israel or otherwise) after 1951.

She eventually found Diamond, who cautions against lawyers who often overcharge, who referred Shem-Or (as he did for me) to Duszniak. (The average rate for a typical application with Duszniak, who charges by the hour, is approximately \$1,800, including fees.) Duszniak's father (neither are Jewish) was part of the Polish underground, and she came to this work organically through academic research that led her to explore Jewish communities in Poland. About 70% of her clients are Jewish.

Duszniak informed Shem-Or that the law had changed and that her father just made the cutoff for eligibility. In 2011, Shem-Or became a Polish citizen – who has yet to step foot in Poland. She's not sure her late father would have approved, but her mother didn't object.

"During this process, I got exposed to my family's Polish documents, which were very moving and kind of emotional," Shem-Or said. "Also, my nephews at the time were doing the family tree, and I had all these documents all of a sudden from Poland, and some of them were original, and it was very exciting for us. And so at some point I decided this is what I wanted to do."

She left her hi-tech job and has now dedicated herself to helping Israelis obtain Polish citizenship, as director of Nicko – Polish Citizenship & Passport Assistance, work she finds extremely fulfilling.

"My clients are of two kinds: Young ones who want citizenship because they want European citizenship, and Polish is the default. And I have older clients who want to do the family research. They want to have names, addresses, and plan to have a trip to Poland to follow in their parents' footsteps. I love these people, and when they're done and come back from Poland, they send me such wonderful emails."

For the highly industrious and organized, children with Polish ancestry can also try to apply on their own through their local Polish Embassy, but it helps to have had punctilious parents who kept documents, like New York-based Jeremy Hockenstein, CEO of Digital Divide Data, a global enterprise helping disadvantaged youth. He first got the idea from Israeli relatives who underwent the process.

His grandmother became pregnant with his mother in the Lodz Ghetto and survived Auschwitz. She gave birth after the war in a small Polish town.

"Before the war, when they had to move into the ghetto, they hid all this paperwork: birth certificates, marriage certificates,

kiddush cups, tablecloths, and other silver under the floorboard. After the war, my mother went back there with the baby and they begged to stay in the room, and they smuggled it all out," Hockenstein said in a telephone interview.

He supplemented these well-organized documents with the American ones and simply went to the Polish Embassy, where very helpful English-speaking clerks assisted him with the entire process.

"Practically, citizenship is just so valuable these days that there are literally refugees putting their lives at risk to have one citizenship, so I felt it was valuable to have. And I thought maybe for my kids, they'd want to live or go to school in Europe, and it would make it easier for them."

ISRAEL-POLISH relations took a major hit last year, when Poland came out with a notorious law that criminalized ascribing the Holocaust to Poland and which still haunts Polish-Israeli relations today. Some Jews view this as a whitewashing of their history.

But Shem-Or says this deterred only a minority of her clients from going through the process. She does not believe Poles are responsible for the Holocaust and believes a feisty underground (in which men like Duszniak's father fought) mitigates some of the evil that took place on its soil. Hence, she does not feel guilty becoming a Polish citizen.

"My parents came here after the war," she said. "They built the country. We're here. We're not so happy. It took a while to understand it's very difficult to live here and there are other options. And it's not that people don't get killed here. They do. So my conscience is clear."

Hockenstein feels there is an act of justice to this process. "Emotionally, it made me feel more connected to my grandparents and family from Lodz. I felt they really were Polish citizens, and most of them were killed and the rest had to leave, and I feel like we did have a long history there, and I felt it was part of my heritage."

Bruner is not sure what her father would think, but she won't allow herself to entertain too much guilt.

"As a person born in Israel, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, I didn't want my children to leave Israel," she said. "But with all the globalization, I've been changing my mind. I'm a bit sad. Maybe it's good that my son has another passport and will have more opportunities elsewhere."

As for me, I could find noble reasons for being Polish – like the redemptive closing of a circle. But mostly, I'd like to think my grandparents would want me to live the best life that I could, one that would make them proud. And if having Polish citizenship will help that, I hope they'd be all for it. ■

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