

Poland

Marcel. Tell me about Poland. What did you live on?

Rachel. I don't know how my parents lived before we were born. Like all the Jews in Poland at that time, *bon papa* had no trade. All he knew was reciting prayers, going to synagogue etc... After they were first married they lived with my paternal grandparents. I don't know how long. *Bonne maman* told me that she had a hard time, that they cut off her hair. She had beautiful hair, you remember that don't you? Thereafter I don't know.

We were born not in Warsaw, but in Pultusk, a small town 30 miles North of Warsaw where my maternal grandparents lived. At the beginning we probably lived there with the help of one or the other set of parents.

My earliest recollection is of living in Warsaw. We were suffering a lot, we were not very rich. It was wintertime and it was impossible to go out without boots. I remember clearly that Alice and I shared a single pair of boots. When one of us was out, the other had to stay home.

I remember a typhoid epidemic. I don't remember if it was that same winter or later. I was about five or six years old. I think it was before Paula was born. It was around 1914-15, something like that. I was the first one to catch typhoid fever. At the time, when you called the doctor they sent you to the hospital, where people were dying like flies. Of course *bonne maman* would not hear of it. I don't know how she managed to get a doctor to make house calls. The rest of the family went to Pultusk while she remained behind to take care of me.

I remember that as a little girl, and not being rich, I had always dreamed of having a doll. As I lay delirious with a high fever, *bonne maman* bought me a doll, probably with the last of her money. I became very attached to that doll, and the doctor said it was good that I was hanging onto life so much. My biggest disappointment came when I improved and became lucid and *bonne maman* had to burn that doll, because I had slept with it, hugged and kissed it, etc...Then, no sooner than I had recovered, and when I should have been cared for further and properly fed, *bonne maman* came down with the same fever. The doctor had predicted it. That is why he had not wanted me to remain at home.

I was taken to my maternal grandmother in Pultusk. Actually, she was not my real grandmother but my grandfather's second wife. (My real grandmother died giving birth to *bonne maman's* brother.) The poor woman was very nice, but she did not have grandchildren of her own (she did not have any children), did not know how to care for us, and really neglected us a lot. I still carry traces of damage to my eyes from that period. The doctor had said I needed glasses, but grandmother was too proud to let her granddaughter wear glasses and would not let me do so. It got worse.

M. What did your maternal grandparents do for a living?

R. My grandfather was a yeast wholesaler. He had a rather substantial business, because it was not a very large town and everybody baked bread and needed yeast. He worked and he was very active.

M. And on the paternal side?

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R. I don't know what they did. They were rich. They were in business, but I don't know what kind. We were never very close to them, because we did not like our paternal grandmother at all. She was a very proud, authoritarian and demanding woman. When she visited us in Pultusk, when we lived there, she made us iron her blouses. We, poor little girls, had to iron her blouses! We did not much like the family on the paternal side.

M. You told me that *bonne maman* had a hard time making a living.

R. That's right. I don't know when she first started working. *Bon papa* worked a little. Did he earn a living? That, I don't know. I don't know what he did exactly. He always had his nose buried in his books. He associated with the relatively modern world of young Zionists, the enlightened Zionists who in addition to Yiddish and Polish also spoke Hebrew, not prayer book Hebrew, but more or less Modern Hebrew. That is why I told you that *bonne maman* had understood that it was up to her to earn a living for the family after Monik and Paula were born.

M. How much younger than you was Paula?

R. Let's figure it out. Aunt Alice was two and a half years older than me. Maurice was a year and a half younger than me and was born in 1911-12. Paula was born about three years later. She was probably born in 1915-16, early in the war. I think *bonne maman* delivered during a German bombardment on the shores of the Vistula (that is perhaps how Paula got her weak heart.) As I told you, we were living near a small bridge over the Vistula. I even ran after my father to watch it burn. For me it was fun. I thought it was a celebration for me, that the fire and all the noise were fireworks.

Bonne maman started visiting farms in the countryside outside Warsaw in order to buy what she could. The most important item at the time was bread. She went looking for flour.

She sewed a special dress with pockets that she filled with flour. This remains etched in my memory. As soon as she came home, all perspired, the first thing we did was to empty the pockets and transfer the flour into sacs in order to keep it from spoiling. All that was in short supply. Today we laugh about it. It sounds so easy, but at the time there were neither plastic bags nor paper bags so we had to manage somehow.

And it was not *bon papa* who sold the stuff. At first, no sooner had she rested a little bit, the poor woman had to rush out again and distribute the merchandise. But later on, people who had placed orders and made downpayments (she needed the money in advance as she did not have the necessary cash to buy the flour) were notified that she was back and they came to the house. I remember the whole town coming to see *bonne maman* and us weighing and emptying these large containers full of flour.

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M. Was *bon papa* affected by the war? Did they try to draft him into the Russian army, or the Polish army if it existed?

R. I don't know. Nobody, especially the Jews, liked to see their children going into the army. So they tried various things. For example, if the oldest brother went into the army, he arranged for the others not to go, perhaps on the grounds that they had to help their parents or by reason of health. One managed as well as one could. It might have been better had *bon papa* gone, because then he might have become more aggressive about getting a job.

Early Schooling

M. Did you all go to school, boy and girls? Was it a Jewish school or Polish school?

R. At first we were still too young to go to school, and it was not yet compulsory. If we had been of school age, it would not have been free, and attending would have been out of the question, because we did not even have enough to live on. That is why, as I told you, *bonne maman* found it necessary to go out and make a living for us all.

M. When did you start school, was that after the 1914-18 war?

R. That's right. We could not start before '17 or '18. First there was that business of languages. For example, when *bonne maman* went to school in Pultusk, they were still using Russian in school. It was rare for a girl with her religious background to go to school, but grandfather felt that she was so intelligent, much more so than her brother who went to the *cheder*, and therefore sent her to school. Without even having gone to *cheder* she was said to have read Hebrew and the prayers better than he did, even with *cheder*.

I don't remember exactly when I started school. It must have been at a young age since I was very young when I graduated. It was not a public school. School was not compulsory at the time. Maybe at age 8? *Bonne Maman* had managed to teach us, because we knew how to read a little and we probably waited for school to start in Polish or German.

M. In what language did you study?

R. I studied in Polish. We waited for the war to end, because during the war we were caught in the middle with the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other. It was either at the end of the war or in 1917, but I do not know whether my parents had enough money to pay tuition, because education was not free. All I can remember is that Maurice went to *cheder* because that starts very early.

Zionism/Communism

M. Is that where you got your first Zionist ideas?

R. Not at all. I was not a Zionist, quite the contrary. I was attending a private Polish school, where the boys and girls were in separate classes. I must have been about 13, almost 14, when I first heard about Communism. The Party was banned, as were all parties, under Pilsudski ¹ who was more or less a fascist. I had a friend in my class who was a little older than me, because as I told you I was always one or two years ahead in school. So if I was 13, she was probably 15 when she started telling me about all the meetings she attended, etc....I became interested in them and

¹ President of Poland

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she described them to me. It was my first exposure to Communist or Socialist organizations and to the fact that the workers had grievances.... As it was after 1917, we also started discussing the Russian Revolution if only in books. I clearly remember that my first contact occurred at the time of my *bachot*². I learned through my friend that my math teacher had gone to the May Day demonstration, which was strictly forbidden at the time. I did not know then that he was a member of the Communist Party. We never saw him again. I found out from her that he had been arrested and jailed, because belonging to the Communist Party was forbidden.

My first encounter with Zionism was also in school at about the same time. That may be why I developed the feeling that Zionism and Socialism were closely linked. It was not the patriotic idea of a Jewish homeland that attracted me to Zionism. Rather, the *kibbutz* was for me something like the *kolkhoz* (collective), which to me was the epitome of socialism. I became involved with the Hashomer Hatzair, i.e. the young Jewish scouts if you will, in the last two years before the *bachot*. My father had always worried that I was leaning towards Communism. Therefore it was with a feeling of relief that he allowed me to attend meetings of the Hashomer Hatzair, since it was not banned by the government.

M. This need to join, did it arise from anti-Semitism? Did you feel anti-Semitism? What made you feel that it would be good to have a Jewish state? Did you feel persecuted, alien in Poland?

R. Persecuted yes. I felt that life was very hard for my parents even though things had improved after the war. Business was better. *Bonne maman* could afford a helper, which was a necessity to allow her to engage in business. She needed someone to mind the baby, take care of the house and prepare meals while the three of us were in school

The idea of communal living in Israel I attracted me to Hashomer Hatzair by. I did not think much about the Jewish question. While I reasoned that it was better to have a homeland where one could live better than in Poland, I was not very enthusiastic about it, and I attached much less weight to this national issue than to the social question. For me the ideal was to live differently in a *kibbutz*, rather than to engage in business and live like the middle class. And that was in spite of the fact that my first contacts with people who had returned from Palestine was with people who had left the *kibbutz* and were upper middle class Jews who were also Zionist, but who had found life in Palestine much too hard.

² Baccalaureate exam. Final High School exam, based on French system.

BELGIUM

Antwerp

M. When did go to Belgium?

R. We left in '27. *Bonne maman* move to the center of Antwerp and opened a small restaurant, almost like a family pension. There were members of the Eckstein ³ family already in Antwerp in the diamond business. They, along with friends and acquaintances, came to eat there. They brought Uncle Sam, my future brother-in-law. For a while things went well: the place became known by word of mouth and had quite a few customers. But then, softhearted *bonne maman* started extending credit, and eventually the business failed.

Alice helped in the restaurant while I went to work in a cigarette factory. I remember that. I think I worked for almost a year. It was hard work, but it provided me with my first contact with working class people, because up to that time in Poland I had not met any. All I knew about them was from my teacher and my little friend, who were both middle class, not working class.

M. Is that where you learned French?

R. Not at all. Antwerp was Flemish. I could not make myself understood (my native tongue was Polish.) So I learned to speak Yiddish. The only social life I could find, was in Jewish circles. Since I had already been a member of Hashomer Hatzair in Poland, I sought them out when I first arrived in Antwerp. That is where I met Dolly, my future husband [Jacques Gunzig], and made many friends.

M. The name Dolly, where does it come from?

R. It's his name from scouts. In the beginning the Hashomer Hatzair were very much like scouts. They gave themselves names, called *totems*, derived from Kipling's Jungle Book. For example, my brother in law Baghi's name is actually his *totem* and is short for Baghera, the panther.

Hashomer Hatzair is also where the idea of leaving for Palestine was born. In Poland I had not thought much about it, because had I stayed in Poland I would probably have gone to Medical School. But in Belgium, given our precarious financial circumstances, I could not see an acceptable future for myself. So I told myself, that since it looked attractive, I would give the *Kibbutz* a try.

³ Rachel's father's relatives

Palestine

Departure

I did not go to *Harshara*, the training program for Kibbutz life. The reason my departure was rushed was that several boys had received permission to go to Palestine. A special document, like a visa, if you will, was required to go there. It was issued by the British who were occupying Palestine. The Zionist movement considered it poor practice to give a certificate to a single girl, because it would essentially waste one unit of the quota.⁴ So the girls arranged marriages of convenience, (marriages of convenience have followed me through life!). I married Eliezer Reich, I remember it very well, who was older than me. He had been teaching me Hebrew. I had learned Yiddish in Antwerp and started learning Hebrew at the same time.

I left for Palestine either at the end of '28 or the beginning of '29 with a rather large Belgian contingent. . When I arrived there, there were very few Belgians in Palestine, except for the ones we had married in Antwerp and who finally scattered. As they were older than us, they went to existing kibbutzim with people their own age.

M. Were there many kibbutzim at the time?

R. At the time there were not as many as today. There was a major one in Petach Tikvah. There was one between Haifa and Hadera whose name I don't remember. There was one in Hadera proper, but it did not work out for me. They were much older than we were.

M. Were the kibbutzim organized by age, you said they were older?

R. Yes. They tried to arrange for the kibbutzim to have people of the same age. I stayed in an already existing kibbutz in Hadera while waiting to join my Polish friends who arrived a few months later. I think it was called Em Shemer ⁵. As to the Belgian kibbutz, the young Belgians with whom I was in Hashomer Hatzair, came perhaps 2-3 years later, because they had to wait for entry permits. They did the same thing we had done; the men married young women because that way they always came as a couple so-called.

Today there are two kibbutzim from that time, one made up mostly of Poles from Warsaw and Lodz, and another one of Belgians who arrived later. That is why, when I go to Israel today, I have friends in Hadera, including one who came from Lodz, and whom I have seen again a couple of times when I was in Israel. He has played a major role, as did all the kibbutzim, in the War of Independence and several members are buried in the kibbutz itself, because we were surrounded by Arabs everywhere. And of course, the British who did not want to withdraw encouraged the Arabs.

Life on the Kibbutz

⁴ The British had established an annual quota system, which was based on family units. Thus a single individual or a family both represented one unit and therefore using a unit for a single person was effectively a waste of one or more potential immigrants.

⁵. This may be the settlement of Shomeira in Upper Galilee near the Lebanese border

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M. And what did you do in the kibbutz?

R. We were assigned work on a rotating basis. When we were at full strength we had about 100 people. I think that we had to do the same work for a month, either on the kibbutz or outside, and then rotated jobs. On the *kibbutz*, people were assigned to kitchen or to dining hall duty or were given laundry assignments, which were very hard. We had no washing machines; we had to walk very far for water and had to light a fire to heat it. It was not a trivial task.

The third job assignment, which was essential to the survival of the *kibbutz*, was outside the kibbutz where we earned the cash that we needed to support ourselves financially. We were receiving some financial support from Hashomer Hatzair headquarters or from the party ⁶, which already existed in Palestine and directed, if you will, from the top all of the existing *kibbutzim* of the Hashomer Hatzair. However, this support was inadequate.

In addition to the *kibbutzim*, there were the *moshavim*. These were [and are] cooperatives whose members owned their own land and houses, but worked the fields cooperatively. It was like a collective, but they did not live together like we did, and furnished their own meals. They supplied their labor, for which they got paid, or shared what they earned. It was not like us.

When we first arrived all we had was a piece of land surrounded by barbed wire, because the Arabs did not welcome us and viewed us as intruders. We had to drain the *wadis* (swamps) and everybody contracted malaria, including me. We had no houses and were living in tents. It is only much later that we built a combination dining room/kitchen because we were afraid to light fires in the tents.

Much later still, we were able to start a garden, and grow carrots, tomatoes and some corn, for our own consumption. I enjoyed this work very much, but it was not easy either. We had to get up very early, 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, before the sun got too hot to water the garden. At first we covered the garden with gauze to keep the sun from beating too hard on it. Much later, we built greenhouses and we had to open them up to a certain time, clean them etc. I liked that better than immersing my hands in dirty, soapy or not so soapy (because we were short of soap too.) water.

The Orange Groves

M. Didn't you work in orange groves?

R. Yes, we took turns doing that. We worked the garden or picked oranges and lemons. It was hard work. It was really a very, very hard life. We had to get up very early and walk an hour and sometimes more in the sand. One had to be athletic in order to manage, to take long strides in order to reach these *pardesim*⁷.

Then we started picking. That part was nice, because we were hungry and thirsty, and when the guards were not looking, we could eat. Eating the oranges still cool from the night, washed by the morning dew was our dessert, our best meal. We ate as much as we could. We could only take them when we were high up in the trees on a ladder, because then, even when they looked, the guards could not see us.

⁶ Poale Zion, the Labor Zionist Party

⁷ Orange groves.

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M. Why, because it was private property, you worked for them?

R. Oh sure.

M. You were doing this to earn cash?

R. Yes, precisely.

M. How long did you stay in Palestine?

R. I returned in 1932.

M. Why did you leave?

On Strike

R. As I already explained to you, when I arrived in Palestine I was already mentally predisposed to join a left wing political party. Then little by little my attention was drawn to various problems. For example we had to join the union. There were both Jewish and Arab workers and we had to fight to get these jobs, because the Arabs worked for much less pay.

One day the union called a strike because the employers had threatened to employ only Arabs if we did not accept a cut in wages. [They were arguing that the business was not earning enough, the usual arguments. Today employers say the exact same thing.] We were told to keep out the Arabs because of the strike,

M. The employers, were they Jewish or Arab?

R. Oh, they were Jews. Do you think for a moment that the Arabs would hire us? It was a tricky situation for the owners. On the one hand, they felt uncomfortable not giving jobs to Jews, because the unions had considerable influence and they knew that we were preparing for a Jewish state etc.. They also felt threatened by the Arabs, and were telling themselves that if they did not have Jews around them, that it would not go well with them. These were people who had lived there for a long time.

So we had to prepare for a strike and keep the Arabs out, because they were supposedly taking our jobs and working for less pay. I remember standing at the entrance of a *Parde*s discussing the situation with a friend from Lodz, the one I saw later on during my visits to Israel. We could not understand what was going on. The union was Socialist Zionist and belonged to the *Poale Zion* (Labor Zionist) movement. It was not Communist, because Hashomer Hatzair had a socialist orientation, left wing socialist in its *kibbutz* life style etc.

We thought it was odd. We felt that as socialists we should have been organizing the Arabs so they would demand the same pay as ours rather than doing the reverse, namely keeping the Arabs out. Then, if we found that we were paid too little, everybody should go on strike. That's what we were discussing. We were not happy. On a couple of occasions we had to get rough with the Arabs. I did not like it. It made me feel like a police officer.

That evening back at the *kibbutz*, we discussed the matter. Many people reached the same conclusion that I had, and we said, "No, we don't want to be policemen, that is not our role." We did not cover all the issues that evening, and agreed to discuss them further another day.

We held a rather stormy session. There was a *kibbutz* administration, a secretariat made up of people who took care of public relations, looked for work for us and maintained liaison with Hashomer Hatzair headquarters. They told us: "Let it drop, we will ask for some higher up of the Hashomer Hatzair to come so we can discuss it all together "

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When the Communists got wind of this, they came to the kibbutz to recruit us to their side. They told us that we should stay as long as possible to sow a seed that would probably bear fruit. Personally I did not like that approach either. I was too young and really (her emphasis) too revolutionary. It was dirty politics and felt the same as the bad union politics. I told myself no, if I really have to leave the kibbutz because of these ideas I will leave it entirely, I cannot stay. This situation lasted a while, a few months. The higher ups of the Hashomer Hatzair, the old timers, came to discuss matters with us. They did not want to lose us. They could feel that a new wind was blowing, probably not only in our kibbutz but in other kibbutzim as well.

All I know is that the evening came when we had to decide whether or not to leave the kibbutz. There was a vote. I think it went, I wouldn't say three quarters, but fifty fifty. I know that many people left. The proof is that I met many of them in Tel Aviv. Many went to Jerusalem.

[Marcel provides a somewhat different and expanded version of this episode in a story he started writing about Rachel. His narrative is based on this interview and other exchanges with Rachel.]

One evening after a particularly acrimonious discussion, a man she had never seen before approached her as she was leaving the communal dining room. He introduced himself as a member of the then illegal Communist Party, and pointed out that her arguments coincided with the aims of the Party. "Only when there is justice for all will Jews also find justice," he said. He talked for a long time describing the International Workers' Revolution that was bound to bring about a great new society.

In the end, he asked her if she would join the Party. Since she already had sympathy for its aims, she accepted, without realizing the impact that this commitment would have on her future.

"It was the beginning of something which affected my whole adult life. I had joined the Party, which represented the future, the avant-garde: the Communists were the romantic revolutionaries of our time, just as Che Guevara is to many young people today. Unfortunately joining the Party also meant accepting Party discipline, which meant in fact giving up your understanding of events, and accepting instead the Party's interpretation. This would lead to tragic outcomes for so many of us in years to come. But at the time, it was a great feeling of security to think that somebody had all the answers..."

After congratulating her on her decision he explained in great detail where, and how, and when they would meet, and what her duties were as a Party member.

"What do you want me to do as a first assignment?" she asked him.

"First you should tone down your rhetoric and accept your union's position, at least on the surface..."

"What? !", she exclaimed, "you just said that I had the correct ideas in this dispute and that this was also the position of the Party, and now you're asking me not to speak out?"

"Hold it! Let me explain! And keep your voice down. You are twenty-one years old, popular in your kibbutz, and you will most likely go far in the union hierarchy, if you accept their position. In fact, though, you would be working for us, and when the time is right, we'll tell you what to do."

She was thinking back of that meeting while watering the garden knowing she had to make a decision soon. But something in her rebelled at the thought of having to say one thing and believe another. "I can't do it!" she decided at last, "Next month I am not going back to the orchard grove and keep the Arab workers from crossing the picket lines." She resigned from the kibbutz as many others did for

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similar reasons and went to Tel Aviv to see her Party contact in order to explain how she felt. "I'm still with you, of course, but I need more direct action," she explained. He was disappointed but he knew that she had made her decision and that nothing he said would change her mind.]

After the Kibbutz

The saddest period of my stay in Palestine was in Tel Aviv. I found myself alone, without. Family Even if I had had any, the thought would never have occurred to me to go looking for them. I contacted the Communist Party. I had to work and eat; the Party did not feed us. So what I to do? The same as Spanish and Italian women do today: do housework. But doing housework in a Jewish bourgeois home is atrocious. You cannot imagine. There, I preferred kibbutz life. That is why, seeing no future I gave up and wrote home. Well, you know *bonne maman*, when she heard I was doing housework for a living she immediately called out "come back, come back". But it turned out that it was not that easy. I needed a visa and my parents could not argue that I was a minor returning home. I was already of age and married, and my husband was planning to remain in Palestine, in Petach Tikvah (I think he was in Ben Gurion's kibbutz). We had seen each other several times; he had come to see me. (I did not much like visiting him.) He had hoped that I would return to his kibbutz and that we would stay married but we had different ideas and did not think alike. I was much more revolutionary, while he was really pure Zionism. He was very well educated in Torah etc. We did not have the same temperament.