

Łukasz Tomasz Sroka

ORCID: 0000-0002-9422-2426

Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie, Muzeum KL Płaszów

Lili Haber and the Second Generation of Holocaust Survivors in Israel. Biographies in Studies on the History of State and Nation¹

Lili Haber i drugie pokolenie Ocalałych z Holokaustu w Izraelu. Biografia w studiach nad historią państwa i narodu

1 The article was written on the basis of the book entitled *Lili Haber. Drugie pokolenie po Holokaście w Izraelu. Narodziny nowego narodu* (English: *Lili Haber. The Second Generation after the Holocaust in Israel. The Birth of a New Nation*), with a *Foreword* by Marian Turski, published by Austeria Publishing House, Krakow–Budapest–Syracuse 2024, and constitutes its synthesis.

Abstract

Looking at the life and activities of Lili Haber, we gain insight into the process of adaptation of Polish Jews to life in Israel. Adopting this perspective, we can also understand the relationships in the family of Polish Jews, Holocaust Survivors, who were thrown by fate into a distant region of the Middle East. We learn about the realities of hastily created camps and housing estates. We take a close look at the "Polish" district in Holon, and then follow the protagonist's family to Tel Aviv. In the background, we see the process of the birth of a new Jewish nation in Israel, which was formed as a result of the merger of three components: the yishuv, i.e. the Jewish community from the pre-state period, the aliyot, i.e. migration waves coming from different directions, and Holocaust Survivors and their descendants.

Keywords

Lili Haber, Jews, Krakow, World War II, Holocaust, KL Plaszow, KL Plaszow Memorial Museum, diaspora, Zionism, identity, Israel

Abstrakt

Przyglądając się życiu i działalności Lili Haber, otrzymujemy wgląd w proces adaptacji Żydów polskich do życia w Izraelu. Przyjmując tę perspektywę, możemy też poznać relacje panujące w rodzinie Ocalałych z Holocaustu Żydów polskich, których los rzucił w odległy region Bliskiego Wschodu. Poznajemy realia panujące w tworzonych naprędce obozach i osiedlach mieszkaniowych. Przyglądamy się z bliska „polskiej” dzielnicy w Holonie, a następnie w ślad za rodziną bohaterki przenosimy się do Tel Awiwu. W tle dostrzegamy proces narodzin nowego narodu żydowskiego w Izraelu, który ukształtował się wskutek połączenia się trzech części składowych: jiszuwu, tj. społeczności żydowskiej z okresu przedpaństwowego, napływających z różnych kierunków aliji, czyli fal migracyjnych, oraz Ocalałych z Holocaustu i ich potomków.

Słowa kluczowe

Lili Haber, Żydzi, Kraków, druga wojna światowa, Holocaust, KL Plaszow, Muzeum KL Plaszow, diaspora, syjonizm, tożsamość, Izrael

Research devoted to the impact of the Holocaust on the process of shaping the Israeli statehood already has an established and high position in historiography. The most famous and appreciated works in this trend include *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* by Tom Segev². There are also biographies and autobiographies of Holocaust Survivors who lived permanently or temporarily in Israel. It is also worth mentioning that many of such works were published by the authors themselves in niche publishing houses and did not enter scientific circulation on a wider scale. Pretext biography offers the prospect of creating new research horizons and deepening our knowledge. To begin with, a basic typology shall be made. The traditional formula of a biography is used to describe the life and activities of a given person. A prosopography studies a specific number of people, thanks to which a collective biography is created. Yet another formula is adopted by a pretext biography, which presents one person as the main character, but the research on that person and the resulting narrative are a starting point for a broader description of a larger group, community, nation and/or state. When I started working on the biography of Lili Haber (born in 1947 in Krakow as Lidia, family name Leser), I assumed that it would be a pretext biography allowing me to analyse and describe the phenomenon of the birth of a new nation in the State of Israel, whose independence was proclaimed on 14th May 1948. I presented all my considerations on this subject in the book entitled *Lili Haber. Drugie pokolenie po Holokauście w Izraelu. Narodziny nowego narodu* (English: *Lili Haber. The Second Generation after the Holocaust in Israel. The Birth of a New Nation*), the foreword to which was written by Marian Turski, president of the International Auschwitz Committee. In this article I will expand on several issues representative of this book.

The main thesis of my book is that a new nation was born in the independent Israel. It happened as a result of a fusion of the following triad into one whole: the yishuv, i.e. the Jewish community from the pre-state period, the aliyot, i.e. migration waves, arriving from various directions, and the Holocaust Survivors and their descendants. It is always about the Jewish nation, but as a result of the synergy of these three components, it was born in a new version, characterised (again) by three aspects: rootedness in the biblical tradition (which consists of religion, Judaism, and the memory of ancient statehood/glory), attachment to the reborn state, and memory of the Holocaust (also a warning against its repetition). That obviously was not the case before. The story of Lili Haber and her family proves that Holocaust Survivors and their descendants created a unique aliyah that stood out from the rest. They brought with them extremely different experience and emotional baggage. That is why I distinguish them from other migration waves, created by people who came from various places at any time, which do not fit into the context of the Holocaust. Due to the importance and

2 T. Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, London 2000.

unprecedented dimension of the Holocaust in the history of the world, Survivors and their families became for Israel not only the third of the constitutive components that determined the overall image of the state, but also gave it a unique character.

Lili Haber's biography focuses, as if in a lens, on key phenomena and processes from the point of view of recognising what happened within the Jewish nation in the 20th century. After nearly two thousand years, Jews rebuilt their state, which once again became the centre of their social, political, cultural and religious life, while respecting the horizontal structure of Judaism and the still important role played by the diaspora. I do not agree with the thesis that the Holocaust "stirred the conscience of the world" and that is why the international community decided to make some "reparations to the Jews". The proclamation of Israel's independence was not a direct consequence of the Holocaust (only), although it influenced that event. Moreover, the scale of impacts resulting from the geopolitical changes being the consequence of World War II was large. They brought about a bipolar system in which two superpowers began to play a leading role: the USA and the USSR. The importance of Great Britain clearly decreased and it no longer had sufficient strength and resources to continue to exercise the mandate over Palestine, which the international community had entrusted to it after World War I. Therefore, on 2nd April 1947, the British government referred the issue of Palestine to the United Nations, which decided to establish the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine for that purpose, and then the Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, from which two subcommittees were separated on 22nd October 1947. Subcommittee no. 1 was responsible for developing a plan to divide Palestine into two separate states, hence its common name, the Subcommittee for Partition. On 23rd October 1947, Ksawery Pruszyński (1907–1950), a Polish lawyer, writer, diplomat and traveller, was elected its chairman. He was the author of a series of reportages published in 1933 in the Vilnius "Słowo", which were collected and published for the first time in the same year in the form of a book entitled *Palestyna po raz trzeci*³ (English: *Palestine for the Third Time*). During the famous UN vote on 29th November 1947, the resolution ending the British Mandate and dividing Palestine into two newly created states was supported by 33 members (including Poland), while 13 states were against it, so the necessary two-thirds majority was secured⁴. The vote in question made sense because in the Land of Israel itself (Hebrew: Eretz Yisrael) there were already solid foundations for Jewish statehood, built by Zionist activists and members of the yishuv, supported by subsequent aliyot arriving there. The arrival of Holocaust Survivors and their descendants gave the state its ultimate *raison d'être* as a safe haven for Jews from

3 See: K. Pruszyński, *Palestyna po raz trzeci*, Warszawa 1996; cf. idem, *Fragmenty*, Kraków–Budapeszt–Syrakuzy 2023.

4 A. Chojnowski, J. Tomaszewski, *Izrael*, Warszawa 2001, p. 54.

around the world. David Harris, a distinguished Jewish diplomat and director general of the American Jewish Committee from 1990 to 2022, expressed his views on this issue clearly and convincingly:

If only there had been an Israeli embassy in Warsaw, Budapest, Bucharest or Paris when Hitler mocked the world saying: "You want Jews? Then take them!" It was before the Wannsee Conference and the "Final Solution", before Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec and Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka and Mauthausen. In 1938, a conference was held in Évian, France, devoted to the so-called Jewish refugee problem. The world's response, with few exceptions, was to close the borders. I know that if Israel had existed, if there had been one country my parents and other Jews trapped in Europe could go to, they would have done so. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) achieved something extraordinary in 1976 in Entebbe, Uganda, when they freed a plane with Jews and Israelis on board that were hijacked by German and Palestinian terrorists. Israel surprised the world by saving almost everyone. How many Jews could have been saved by similar IDF troops during World War II?⁵

A breakthrough event on the Jews' path to regaining their own statehood was the birth of the Zionist movement at the end of the 19th century. The influence of this movement is visible in Lili Haber's family, although her parents came from two different worlds. Her mother Antonina née Bornstein was born on 18th February 1917 in Krakow into a secularised Jewish family. In the school years 1923/24-1934/35, she attended the prestigious Hebrew Secondary School, which was famous for its high level of teaching and, at the same time, was under the influence of the Zionist thought. Lili's father, Jakub Leser, was born on 25th February 1913 in Krakow into a pious Hasidic family of Lea and Izaak (Icchok) Hersch (Hirsh) Leser (Izaak Zvi Leser in Hebrew, also spelled Icchak Hersz Lazar in documents). Lili's father first attended the Cheder Ivri folk school on Kupa Street in Krakow, which was adjacent to the Isaac Synagogue, and then the Tachkemoni religious school operating under the auspices of Mizrahi. In the last year of his education, i.e. 1931/1932, Jakub Leser transferred to the Hebrew Secondary School to take the Matura exam (the secondary school final examination). The Tachkemoni school was not empowered to conduct such examinations⁶. In the academic year 1933/1934, Jakub Leser studied at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Jagiellonian University. Later, for unknown reasons, he interrupted his studies⁷. At the same Faculty, in the Humanities Section, in the

5 *Na pierwszej linii. Życie żydowskiego dyplomaty. David Harris w rozmowie z Agnieszką Markiewicz*, Krakow 2023, p. 97-99.

6 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 30/01/2023.

7 Jagiellonian University Archives (hereinafter: JUA), Senate Catalogues of Students (hereinafter: SCS), sign. S II 397: Jakub Leser.

Fig. 1
Lili Haber née Leser with
her mother, Antonina
(Jonia) Leser née Bornstein,
Krakow 1948

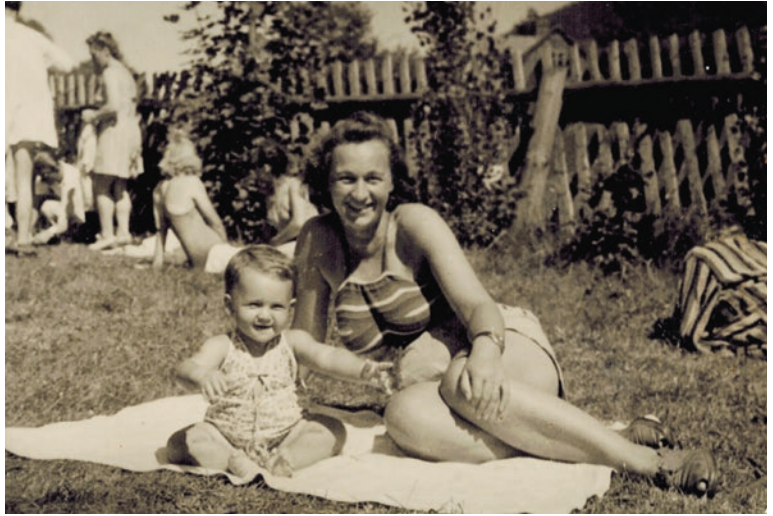


Fig. 2
Lili Haber, September 1975



academic year 1936/1937, Lili's mother began English Studies, which were interrupted by the outbreak of World War II⁸. After the end of the war, Tonia and Jakub returned to their studies. According to student ID cards issued by the Jagiellonian University, Jakub Leser continued his studies at the Faculty of Humanities in the academic year 1946/1947, while Tonia Bornstein studied three years before the war and another two years after the war in 1945/46 and 1946/47⁹. It is uncertain whether they obtained master's degrees¹⁰. Tonia and Jakub became fluent in Hebrew. When filling out documents accompanying the admission to study at the Jagiellonian University, Lili's mother declared Polish and Hebrew as her native languages, while her father entered only Hebrew. Lili noted in her memory that her mother spoke Polish, English, Hebrew and German. She might have also understood Yiddish, but, as Lili points out, "in our house, our parents never spoke Yiddish"¹¹. Their attachment to the Hebrew language was related to their support for the Zionist idea.

In the interwar period, the eldest sister of Lili Haber's father, Rywka Kurtz née Leser, emigrated to Eretz Yisrael with her husband and two daughters. In 1934, her husband Szymon Kurtz was the first to arrive there. In September 1936, his wife and daughters joined him. They were an Orthodox family. They settled in Tel Aviv. They ran a small company producing and selling bras. In 1934, Lili's father's brother, Abraham (Romek) Leser, also left for Eretz Yisrael. While still in Poland, he had married Ester, with whom he made aliyah. He worked as a bus driver for EGED, which grew to become Israel's largest passenger transportation company¹². Lili's grandfather Isaac Hersch Leser had strong Zionist beliefs, which encouraged him to travel to Eretz Yisrael for the opening ceremony of the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem on 1st April 1925, together with a delegation from Poland and representatives of Krakow¹³. According to Lili Haber:

After that, he would come there every two years and even intended to settle there and join his two sons who had arrived in Palestine in the early 1930s. Ichak Zwi Leser even became the proud owner of an Eretz Yisrael passport [British Mandate of Palestine]. In July 1939, he returned to Poland to liquidate his businesses and make his dreams come true and live in the Land of Israel. However, he did not make it. The war that broke out two months later thwarted those plans, my grandfather died in Auschwitz¹⁴.

8 JUA, KSS, sign. S II 425, S II 436, S II 0-6: Tonia Bornstein.

9 Lili Haber's family archives (hereinafter: LHA).

10 JUA, JU Senate Records from 1945-1953, sign. S III 305, S III 323: Tonia Bornstein, sign. S III 311, S III 329: Jakub Leser.

11 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 2/02/2023.

12 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 10/04/2020.

13 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 26/12/2019, 2/02/2023.

14 *Kraków, moje miasto – Lili Haber*, 21/08/2016, fundacjapolania.pl/aktualnosci/krakow-moje-miasto-lili-haber, DOA: 5/02/2023.

Lili Haber's family history juxtaposed with our general knowledge of the realities prevailing before the outbreak of World War II makes us very careful in formulating opinions regarding the attitudes of European Jews (including Polish ones) towards the Zionist movement and its postulate concerning migration to Eretz Yisrael. The decision to emigrate necessitated a far-reaching change in lifestyle. It required starting anew, in completely different social, political, cultural, economic, geographic and climatic conditions. All this involved thought and preparation. The example of Lili Haber's grandfather proves the need for efficient and prudent closure of business activities conducted in Poland, which required time, of which there was less and less... Let us add to this the formal, official and economic barriers multiplied by the authorities of the British Mandate of Palestine, which were intended, if not to stop, then at least to decisively limit Jewish migration to Palestine in the name of seeking consensus with the Arab population. Therefore, it cannot be said that supporters of the Zionist idea left Poland and Europe, while those who expressed different political beliefs remained in place. Many wanted to emigrate, but could not (e.g. did not have adequate assets) or did not manage to do so due to family, professional or unforeseen circumstances. It should be borne in mind that the motives and directions of emigration were varied. If someone was motivated to emigrate by the Zionist idea (which did not exclude other factors, such as growing anti-Semitism, high unemployment and lack of prospects for a better future), the Land of Israel was at the centre of their interests. Among emigrants not interested in Zionism, countries from the broadly understood West, such as France and the USA, were very popular. The policy of the Polish state authorities also varied, as they eagerly stimulated Jewish emigration by drawing up more and less realistic plans in this regard¹⁵.

The tragedy of the Holocaust did not spare Lili Haber's family. During the war, her maternal grandmother and both grandfathers were murdered. Her paternal grandmother died in 1933, before the war. She was buried in the family tomb, which is located in Krakow at the new Jewish cemetery on Miodowa Street. Her daughter and Jakub's sister, Hana Cyrl, who died prematurely due to illness in January 1913, is also buried there. Before March 1941, Lili's paternal grandfather, Izaak Hersch, and his five children lived in Krakow: Sara Altman née Leser with her younger son Jehuda, daughter Perla and sons Jakub, Boaz (less than a year younger than Jakub) and Szulem Haim (three years younger than Lili's father) lived in Krakow. In the next stage of the Holocaust, deportations to the Krakow ghetto began. Poles who had previously been living in Podgórze were displaced. Jews with permission to stay in Krakow had to move to the ghetto by 20th March 1941, and the ghetto was closed the next day. Among the previously mentioned six family

15 See: Z. Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna. Polskie plany emigracyjne wobec Żydów 1935-1939*, Warszawa 2018.

members, probably only Jakub and Szulem Haim received permission to stay and work in the ghetto. The rest of the family had to leave Krakow and move somewhere else¹⁶. According to Lili:

They rented an apartment on the outskirts of Krakow, with a Polish family, in Wola Duchacka. Jakub (Janek) and Szulem (Lolek) lived in a small room at 16 Zgody Square. Their sister Sara and her son also lived there. Sara and Jehuda obtained false documents and fled to Budapest, where they lived until the end of the war. Izak Hersch did not have the appropriate documents to stay in the ghetto, and with several relatives he hid in the attic at 5 Zgody Square. Boaz joined them in this hiding place when he left the Polish Army. After the first "ghetto liquidation action", at the end of May 1942, two daughters of Mordechaj Gebirtig [Lola and Basia] and their friend joined the Leser family in this small room at 16 Zgody Square¹⁷.

On 13th–14th March 1943 the final liquidation of the Krakow ghetto took place. During the selection process from among 8 thousand Jews living here, approximately 2 thousand were shot on the spot. Many tragic scenes took place on Zgody Square, which is now called Ghetto Heroes Square. The remaining Jews were sent to KL Auschwitz or expelled to Plaszow camp.

Lili's parents, Tonia (in Israel, she will use the name Jona) and Jakub, together with their families, were imprisoned in Plaszow camp. Let us recall that it was a labour and concentration camp created by the authorities of the German Third Reich as one of three concentration camps in the General Government. It was established in October 1942 as a labour camp (Zwangsarbeitslager – ZAL). It was intended mainly for several thousand Jews from the liquidated Krakow ghetto. Later, Jews were also sent here from other liquidated ghettos, e.g. from Wieliczka, Tarnów and Rzeszów. Poles were also imprisoned here. In January 1944, the labour camp was transformed into KL Plaszow concentration camp. In 1944, Hungarian Jews arrived here and were eventually sent to KL Auschwitz. According to various estimates, a total of approximately 30,000 people (mostly Jews) were imprisoned in KL Plaszow during the war. Approximately 5,000 people were murdered there¹⁸.

Jakub Leser was sent to ZAL Plaszow together with his father Izaak Hersz and three siblings: Perla, Boaz and Szulem Haim¹⁹. Initially, Jakub and Szulem lived in the same barrack and worked together in a locksmith's workshop. Years later, in his memoir "for his grandchildren", Lili's

16 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 10/04/2020.

17 Ibidem.

18 R. Kotarba, *Niemiecki obóz w Płaszowie 1942–1945*, Warszawa–Kraków 2009.

See also: idem, *Niemiecki obóz w Płaszowie 1942–1945. Przewodnik historyczny*, 2nd revised edition, Kraków 2016.

19 Ibidem.

father described the conditions he found himself in as "quite bearable"²⁰. However, he was critical of the kapo (a prisoner assigned to supervisory functions) named Reich: "who was a cruel and rude man, harassed me mercilessly"²¹. However, he soon discovered a warehouse near his workshop where the Germans kept equipment, machines and tools confiscated from Jews. There he noticed soda production equipment which, in his opinion, belonged to his brother Nachman Leser from Tarnów, who, like his family in Krakow, owned a soda water production plant. Jakub decided to take advantage of this situation because, as he concluded, "in those days it was good to hang around the kitchen"²². Moreover, he also saw it as a way to get a safe distance from the brutal kapo. Therefore, he turned to a prisoner named Meir (according to Ryszard Kotarba, it was a German Jew Leo Majer/Meier)²³, who was responsible as the kapo for the work of the kitchen serving prisoners and the camp staff. He suggested that he start producing soda water for the staff in KL Plaszow. Meir obtained the necessary permits from his superiors "And so there was a soda factory in the camp"²⁴. What is more, Jacob and his brother Boaz also started producing ice cream. Only staff members were supposed to consume them, but the brothers tried to secretly offer them to at least those prisoners with whom they were in close relationships.

The friendship of Jakub, Boaz, Rena, Lola and Basia came to an end in KL Plaszow in drastic circumstances. Jakub Leser writes about it:

On a hot summer day in August 1944, thousands of women were captured on the roll-call ground and put into cattle wagons [after the war, Lili's father learned that the transport was sent to Auschwitz and then some of KL Plaszow's prisoners to Stutthof, only a few people in it survived]. Each wagon had a window with bars. In one of the wagons standing in front of me, I noticed through the window Rena Meisels, Lola and Basia Gebirtig. Despite the strict ban on approaching the wagons, I took a bucket of water and sandwiches and went to their window. At that moment, an SS guard saw me. He beat me with terrible cruelty. I fell unconscious²⁵.

Lili's father survived the occupation thanks to his work in enamel factory managed by Oskar Schindler. His sister Perla was the first to find employment there as a seamstress. There, she also sought employment for her brothers, Jakub and Szulem. Unfortunately, their father was not so lucky. According to Lili Haber's findings:

20 J. Leser, *Wspomnienia dla moich wnuków*, LHA, transl. from Hebrew by L. Haber, ed. by Ł.T. Sroka.

21 Ibidem.

22 Ibidem.

23 R. Kotarba, *Żydzi Krakowa w dobie zagłady (ZAL/KL Plaszow)*, Kraków-Warszawa 2022, p. 607.

24 J. Leser, op. cit.

25 Ibidem.

Izaak Hersz worked in the Madritch factory [it is a reference to Julius Madritsch's clothing factory operating in KL Plaszow]. On Sunday, 7th May 1944, a "selection" took place. All prisoners had to appear before a special committee to examine their physical fitness. The committee decided who goes to the right – to life, and who to the left – to death. Izaak Hersch Leser (as well as my second grandfather, my mother's father – Jom Tov Lipman Bornstein) were sent to the left. A week later, on Sunday, 14th May 1944 (exactly 4 years before the Independence Day of the State of Israel), everyone classified as having poor physical condition was sent to Auschwitz²⁶.

On 14th May 1944, Lili's grandparents, i.e. Izaak Hersz Leser (Lili's father's father) and Lipman Bornstein (Lili's mother's father) were selected to be transported to Auschwitz. They were murdered there on the same day. From the *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz* (English: *Calendar of Events in KL Auschwitz*) by Danuta Czech, we learn that on that day "Old people, sick people and children – Jews, were brought from KL Plaszow. They were killed in a gas chamber"²⁷.

In late 1944, KL Plaszow got liquidated. Perla, Jakub and Szulem were included in the famous "Schindler's List". On 15th October of the same year, 900 "Schindler's Jews" were sent to Konzentrationslager (KL) Gross-Rosen, from where they were eventually sent to Arbeitslager (AL) Brännlitz (a branch of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp). Moreover, 300 women were sent first to Auschwitz, and from there also to Brännlitz. All three siblings, along with approximately 1,200 other "Schindler's Jews", were liberated on 9th May 1945. Boaz managed to survive until the end of the war, working to clear the former KL Plaszow camp and then transferred to several other camps. The eldest brother of Lili's father, the previously mentioned soda water producer Josef Nachman Leser (born in 1902, the only religious member of the family), living with his wife and four children in Tarnów, was murdered in September 1942 in the local ghetto²⁸. Lili's father's sister, Ester Erna (aka Escia) née Leser, who was born around 1905, was very lucky. In 1928, she married Josef Englander from Nowy Targ, where they lived. Before the war they had three daughters. When the war broke out, they fled to the Czech Republic and stayed there until the end of the war. Their three daughters survived hidden in a convent. After the war they emigrated to the USA²⁹. Lili's father's two other siblings also survived the war, his brother Awram and sister Rywka, who emigrated to Eretz Yisrael in 1934 and 1936, respectively.

Like Lili's paternal grandfather, her mother also worked at the Madritch factory. She was in KL Plaszow until its liquidation. On 22nd or

26 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 10/04/2020.

27 D. Czech, *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*, Oświęcim-Brzezinka 1992, p. 658.

28 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 10/04/2020.

29 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 11/04/2020.

26th October 1944, she was sent to KL Auschwitz. She went there with her mother Mindel née Stern and two sisters: the elder Bela, who got married before the war, in 1938, and the younger Augusta (she was called Gusta, most likely short for Augusta)³⁰. According to Danuta Czech, on 22nd October 1944, "In the evening, over 2,000 Jewish women and a dozen or so Jewish men from the camp hospital were brought from KL Plaszow to KL Auschwitz II"³¹. Stania Mannheim, who was with Antonina, told Lili that they arrived at Auschwitz on 26th October³².

During registration in Auschwitz, Lili's mother, her mother and her sisters stood together next to each other. Therefore, they were tattooed with consecutive numbers. They stayed there until 17th January 1945. They were then sent under inhumane conditions on a "death march" to Ravensbrück. There, Mindel was murdered in a gas chamber, and Bela died of illness. Lili's mother and her youngest sister Gusta set off on another "death march" to the Neustadt-Glewe camp. In her application for compensation, Lili's mother wrote to the Germans:

From 25th January 1945 to 15th February 1945, I stayed in Ravensbrück and did not work. From 15th February to 2nd May 1945, I was in the Neustadt-Glewe concentration camp, where I worked in agriculture, in the fields near the camp, for instance, digging in the fields and loading potatoes onto wagons. One day, while standing on a cart, on a pile of potatoes, I managed to put the potatoes in my pocket and did not notice that a German inspector was following me. She was hitting me on the head and back with a heavy stick. I lost my balance and fell off the trailer onto the ground. The inspector came down to me and continued beating and kicking me until I lost consciousness. With the help of other prisoners, I returned to the camp in the evening and lay on the floor of the barrack where I lived, unable to move for two weeks³³.

In Neustadt-Glewe, Antonina and Gusta saw the end of the war. They both decided to return to Krakow. This was especially insisted on by Gusta, who wanted to know whether her fiancé survived the war. Since they were sick, famished and exhausted, they had to undergo convalescence before they could set off. They arrived in Krakow after about three weeks. Here it turned out that Gusta's fiancé, Henek (Henryk) Wachtel, also survived the war. Soon Gusta and Henek got married. Uncle Henek managed to complete his medical studies in dentistry before leaving Poland. They emigrated to Israel in 1957 as part of the Gomułka aliyah. They settled in Haifa³⁴.

30 Conversation with Lili Haber, 08/04/2020.

31 D. Czech, *Kalendarz wydarzeń...*, p. 792.

32 Conversation with Lili Haber, 08/04/2020.

33 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 2/02/2023.

34 Conversation with Lili Haber, 8/04/2020.

After years of searching, Lili Haber found information about her family in a list of immigrants who came to Israel from January to February 1950. These materials are kept in the collections of the Israel State Archives. It follows from them that on 3rd January 1950, they reached the port of Haifa on board the ship "Negba". The documents include the names of Lili's parents and Lili herself, who is listed as "Lea". Thus, for the first time since emigrating from Poland, her name was changed, and for the second and final time it was done at school. Most likely on 4th January 1950, they settled in the Sha'ar Aliyah camp (Hebrew: the Gate of Aliyah) in Atlit on the northern outskirts of Haifa. There, immigrants were registered, the necessary documents were issued and medical examinations were performed. Immigrants from Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, France and Poland came with them³⁵. Lili and her parents were the first representatives of their families to reach Israel after the end of the Holocaust³⁶. This is where their new life began...

The first place where the Lesers were accommodated in Israel was the previously mentioned Sha'ar Aliyah camp in the northern part of Haifa. They most likely stayed there from 4th January to 22nd or 25th January 1950. They were then transferred to Machane Olim Israel B near the city of Lod. They lived there until 15th March 1950, less than two months. No city or other settlement was established on the site of that camp. After its liquidation, a factory complex was built there. The former camp is commemorated by a plaque at the entrance to one of the industrial plants. They then lived in Ma'abara Shimon in southern Tel Aviv, on the border with Jaffa, in a neighbourhood called "Abu Kabir" in Arabic. They spent nearly two years there, i.e. from 15th March 1950 to 16th January 1952 (according to preserved family documents). Later they moved to Holon, where they bought their own apartment. Ultimately, they settled in Tel Aviv³⁷.

The attitude of Holocaust Survivors allows us to distinguish not only the family models they shaped, but also the strategies of intra-family communication. The excess of traumatic experiences stuck deep in people, regardless of whether they externalised it or not. Some wanted to talk about it constantly, others escaped from it into reverie, nostalgia, some kind of temporary detachment from reality. The second variant is visible in the case of Lili Haber's mother, who was looking for oblivion by immersing herself in reading books. Holding a book in her hands, she seemed alienated, somewhere far away with her thoughts. Lili's father tried to rationalise it all somehow, but he was also one of those who sparingly shared knowledge about the Holocaust with his children. In the 1980s, he wrote his memoirs "For the Family". One of the first chapters is titled "Our Bond of Silence". He writes there as follows:

35 See: www.archives.gov.il/archives/Archive/0b0717068001a9a2/File/0b071706806d4d50, DOA: 3/02/2022.

36 Conversation with Lili Haber, 16/12/2019.

37 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 24/05/2020.

Our daughters, who survived the Holocaust in the second generation, will also benefit from this knowledge [of history], because they grew up in times and environment in which they lacked an important link in family life – the role and place of grandparents in the family. What did the school's annual Holocaust Day celebration give them, a child's recitation or a teacher's lecture? They heard nothing at home and were far from all the events of their parents' past during the Holocaust, a kind of sacred taboo bond of silence. In our opinion, at that time it would have been to their detriment and we did not want to interfere with the children's natural development – these were generally the norms in families of Holocaust survivors. The bond of silence between us and our children was very oppressive, and especially heavy was Tonka's fear that words could revive faded pains, open unhealed wounds, and that horrors could disturb the children's natural development. They received little compared to our great desire to devote ourselves to them. We were afraid of how the children would react mentally. So, the conclusion was that it was better to hide the past from their knowledge and focus on trying to rebuild our lives. To live in the present without expressing difficult events that we had experienced in the past. Forty years have passed since the trauma, and the awareness and ability to reveal past experiences has matured among Holocaust survivors. We keep our personal scars and psychological wounds to ourselves – and live with them. They all rebuilt their lives as best they could. So did we³⁸.

Jakub Leser's memoirs met the expectations of his daughters, who wanted to learn more about their family history. While Survivors most often showed one of two extreme reactions to the Holocaust experience, i.e. withdrawing into themselves or astounding everybody with the stories and habits derived from that time, the second generation of Survivors reacted adequately, feeling a lack of information or being overloaded with it (in a way being crushed by the burden carried by their parents). It naturally gave rise to intra-family and social tensions, which resulted from the coexistence of the discourse on the Holocaust also in public space. In short, two basic and still valid (not only in Israel) questions are: how much and how should we educate about the Holocaust? Since the end of World War II, many specialised institutions have been dealing with it, and a number of publications, scientific and teaching aids have been created. However, this subject has not found its conclusion and probably never will, because each generation must confront it in its own way, taking into account its own experience, capabilities, sensitivity and needs. However, writing about it from the scientific perspective was and still is much easier than working on this topic in a family environment. An example here is the Leser family. Lili wanted

38 Lili Haber's family archives.

to explore her parents' wartime history, while (especially) her mother wanted to treat that time as a closed chapter in her biography. She was consistent in it, also towards others. Even with her own sister Gusta, she did not discuss the topic. Lili Haber formulated her own reflections on this matter as follows:

Among the approximately 50 letters that Gusta sent to my mother, there is no mention of the pre-war past. They do not correspond about life in Krakow before the war or what happened during the war, nor do they mention their murdered parents or murdered sister and brother. Really strange.

I asked my daughter, a psychology doctor, about this, how is it possible, after all, they are alone in the world and why don't they share their longing for home, parents, family and friends? It was as if they locked what had happened in a chest and threw away the key³⁹.

In the preserved correspondence that Tona and Gusta managed to exchange, many issues were discussed, from the significant to the smallest ones, such as the process of their children's growing up, health, work, food, clothes... A nagging question is whether such a set of topics for conversation indeed confirms the "break" with the Holocaust, or indicates that, although perhaps "subcutaneously", it still did not allow them to forget about it. After all, access to food and health were among the key conditions for surviving the Holocaust (without diminishing the importance of other factors). Hence, they sometimes resulted in a certain obsession with thoughts about being healthy and well-fed.

In Survivors' homes special attention was paid to food, to providing the family with the necessary supplies and decent living conditions. Parents made sure that even the smallest part of food was not wasted. The memory of famine during World War II is reflected in that. The Polanim's excessive concern for their children, often exaggerated, may have resulted partly from the cultural codes imprinted on them and derived from middle-class life in Poland, but it is also highly probable that it was a result of the Holocaust as well. In every geographical location, parents strive to ensure that their children are well-cared for and healthy. Nevertheless, Holocaust Survivors felt additional pressure in this regard: disease often condemned Jews to death, not even by its own nature, but as a result of the selection to which they were permanently subjected. Scenes with the Nazis, sending some Jews to the right and others to the left based on their health condition and, consequently, their usability for further work, are emblematic in this case. The former could stay alive (although without knowing for how long), the latter were killed immediately. As Lili Haber recalls, she inherited her parents' panic fear of illness, even something as trivial as a cold:

39 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 23/12/2021.

There is a way of reasoning encoded in my head that a sick person may not pass the selection process and will be sent in the “wrong direction”, to death! That’s why you mustn’t get sick! But people get sick and they have to bear it somehow and react to it pragmatically. Meanwhile, I can’t even talk calmly to the doctor. That’s why Jehuda [Lili Haber’s suppose] goes with me to medical appointments⁴⁰.

In such a situation, it is easy to imagine that the period of pregnancy and motherhood was not easy and pleasant for Lili. In addition to her swirling thoughts, she was troubled by the lack of knowledge and experience that young girls traditionally gain alongside their mothers, having serious conversations, asking about many intimate matters, and often joking... She lacked this while growing up.

My start as a mother was very difficult. I probably didn’t really understand what that meant. A baby weighing less than three kilograms and, in addition, very sick, demanded all of my attention, and suddenly nothing else was important or had any meaning. Just the baby. I’m not sure if such a reaction wasn’t due to the fact that in my childhood and youth I didn’t grow up in a multi-generational environment that included both infants and small children, as well as older people, such as grandparents. All families were the same. I didn’t realise how much my life would change, forever. The situation I found myself in affected my mood and nerves. After a relatively short period of time, I decided I couldn’t take it all anymore and left my job at the National Insurance Institute⁴¹.

Moreover, the question of health was important since the Survivors’ families were plagued by diseases that were also the result of the Holocaust. We find confirmation of this in Lili’s memories:

I am re-reading the correspondence between my aunt Gusta and my mother. It seems that “food”, “eating”, and even cooking were the main issues that were mentioned very often. Another issue is health: the fact that my father, after liberation and before I was born, suffered from pneumonia twice and had serious lung problems. Then, in 1951, already in Israel, he had typhus. In 1950, my mother was also sick and had problems with her kidneys, bladder and high blood pressure; she was only 33 years old then, but... after spending 5 years in the ghetto and concentration camps⁴².

40 Conversation with Lili Haber, 16/12/2019 r. Correspondence with Lili Haber 26/04/2020 and 12/05/2020.

41 Ibidem.

42 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 28/04/2020.

The joys and sorrows experienced together, the efforts made, successes and failures cemented newcomers' families. The second generation of descendants of Holocaust Survivors growing up there felt a strong bond with their parents and respected them. However, each generation needs to mark its distinctiveness. The second generation had the opportunity to experience the universal advantages of the value system passed on to them at home, but in kindergartens, schools and universities, the cultural patterns were set by the Sabras. In Israel, it was fashionable to be a Sabra. Many newcomers even dreamed of being like the Sabras. Lili Haber was also influenced by them and admits:

None of us wanted to be a new immigrant. We all wanted to be Sabras. And the Sabras speak Hebrew and dress casually. We didn't like to dress like in Poland, I still remember the arguments about whether my mother should comb my hair and tie it with a "bow" or not⁴³.

In the memories of the newcomers, we often find comments about their desire to be like the Sabras, as well as expressions of appreciation for their different temper and clothing. Shlomo Adler, a Holocaust Survivor from Poland who reached Israel as a seventeen-year-old in September 1947, is one of those who write about this. Earlier, the British, who were still in power there, had sent him to an internment camp in Cyprus for a year. His stay there became a time of learning and preparation for the armed struggle for Israel's independence:

So I didn't fall on my knees and kiss the long-awaited soil of my homeland. Already in Cyprus I started preparing for this meeting. I wanted to be like (Kaktus) Shaul Biber, a "cabar" who was the unofficial captain of my illegal boat. Shaul Biber. Was he an example of behaviour for me? Hanging around in shorts and biblical sandals I had never seen before. I will be like him when I finally come to the Promised Land⁴⁴.

It was easier for young people to adapt. Older people, who already had a clearly formed personality and their own style (including clothing), had a problem with this. Their efforts often brought bizarre results. This problem occurs in the memoirs of Marcel Goldman, who came to Israel in 1949 at the age of 23. There he found his parents, Maksymilian (Mordechaj) Goldman (born 1901) and Sara née Goldberger (born 1903), who emigrated to Israel in 1948. According to today's standards, they would not be considered old, but at that time they were perceived that way (e.g. by potential employers) and they probably felt that way themselves, tired of too many experiences and the constant need to adapt to changing living conditions (Mordechaj

43 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 19/04/2020.

44 S. Adler, *Zołnierz w sandałach* [transl. from Hebrew by the author], Toruń 2020, p. 14.

died in 1956 at the age of only 55 years). During his first meeting with his father in Israel, Marcel Goldman felt surprised:

It's possible that I wouldn't have recognised him on the street. He did not resemble that elegant man from Krakow he had used to be. I get the impression that he played the role of an Israeli just as he had imagined him. He was wearing khaki pants. He also bought this type of shirt. He probably believed that by wearing a costume promoted by Zionists, he would somehow seal his Israeliness in a symbolic way. I must point out that I have never worn this type of clothes, although of course I adapted my wardrobe to the local climate⁴⁵.

By following, at least partially, the example of the Sabras, the second generation turned to the future that was to be built in Israel. The Israeli authorities, as already mentioned, pursued a policy of rejecting the diaspora, *galut*, which gained the Hebrew name *shlilat ha-golah*. According to this policy, the stereotypically understood bourgeois and intelligentsia representative, who was supposed to be timid, delicate and frail, was shunned. The Sabra was put on a pedestal and was credited with fortitude, courage, straightforwardness and openness. The Sabras were also associated with vitality, tan, athletic figure and a sense of ease. However, the attempt to negate the diaspora meant denying one's own roots. It was much easier to do this at the epidermal level, becoming like people from Israeli streets in terms of clothing and superficial relationships. However, the cultural codes from the diaspora integrated into the identity of representatives of the second generation turned out to be exceptionally durable and vital. They were still influenced by relatives, friends and acquaintances raised in the diaspora. In Lili's case, these were primarily parents who enjoyed very high authority. Lili's mother's sister Gusta remained in close contact with her, sending her parenting advice by letter from Krakow⁴⁶.

By looking at the subsequent years of Lili Haber's life, we gain insight into the process of her integration with the mainstream of Israeli society, which led from kindergarten, through school, the army, studies and professional work. At each of these stages we can trace what is typical for an Israeli woman and what is unique in a representative of the second generation of Holocaust Survivors. In the pages of Lili Haber's biography, I have carefully illustrated her personal contribution to the development of Israel. It is also a convenient starting point for the description of her generation, which had its own specificity and an important role to play. So far, biographies referring to Israel have been dominated by works about men who played important leadership roles in the army and politics. Research on Lili Haber allowed me to adopt the

45 Ł.T. Sroka, *A Man of Success in the Land of Success. The Biography of Marcel Goldman*, Boston 2022, p. 185.

46 Gusta's letters to Tonka from 1950–1957.

perspective of a woman who did not hold political or military positions (although, in accordance with the rules in force in Israel, she completed compulsory military service). The life path of a Jewish woman born in Krakow (therefore in the diaspora), who took root in Israel so early and firmly that we can perceive her as a typical Sabra (therefore a Jew born in Israel), is cognitively interesting. Until 1987, she lived the life of a Sabra. Poland (its history and culture) had basically no meaning for her. She did not speak Polish at all and did not maintain any contacts with Poland. But then, everything changed.

In 1987, Lili Haber took part in a family trip to Poland organised by her father. So far, their family had been one of those in which the Holocaust had not been discussed at all or had rarely been discussed, without personal details. On a scientific basis, the problem of struggling with the memory of the Holocaust was interestingly described by Janine Holc, who notes: "We cannot ask survivors for more than they can give us, but we should notice the ruptures in their coping strategies that allow the emergence – gradually, tentatively, conditionally at times – of the effaced aspects of agency"⁴⁷. The trip to Poland broke the barrier blocking Jakub and Jona's daughters from access to information about their war fate. They did not become a family from the opposite pole, in which the Holocaust is constantly discussed at every opportunity. The Lesers continued to sparingly share with their daughters knowledge about that subject, but especially their father began to open up to those difficult conversations. During their stay in Poland, they mainly visited places related to the history, culture and the Holocaust of Polish Jews. Their route included former camps: Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The visit to the former KL Plaszow caused deep indignation and sadness in Lili's father. He could not accept the fact that the place where thousands of people were imprisoned, brutally tortured and murdered was not properly commemorated⁴⁸. After World War II, anyone could enter the former camp and act as they pleased. It had its unpleasant consequences. Lili Haber admits that her subsequent involvement in the cause of establishing the KL Plaszow Memorial Museum resulted from those experiences and was a desire to satisfy her father's legitimate expectations that the victims of the camp once located there would be given the respect they deserved⁴⁹.

The time spent in Krakow was full of family stories, visits to places that were part of their private history, and searching for traces of their ancestors. As Lili Haber recalls: "only the four of us were discovering »our Krakow«"⁵⁰. There were also reflections about the city itself, what was old (known) in it and what was new after their departure to

47 J. Holc, "Holocaust Testimony, Autobiography, and the Effaced Self", *Autobiografia. Literatura – Kultura – Media*, 2020, no. 1(14), p. 31.

48 Ibidem.

49 Conversation with Lili Haber, 29/12/2022.

50 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 30/08/2020.

Israel. An Israeli woman born in Krakow, after many years, noticed that, being perfectly integrated into the Israeli mainstream, she had cultural features arising from the traditions of Polish Jews, and she felt a special bond with Krakow, with its current and former inhabitants. Years later, she commented on it as follows: "Not many people can say that it was only at the age of 40 that they saw their hometown for the first time. I was born in Krakow, but it was only on my fortieth birthday, when I returned to my hometown for the second time, that I really saw it"⁵¹. Knowledge about her family's wartime fate made her more interested in the history of the diaspora and, in particular, the Holocaust.

Lili Haber's growing social activity meant that she quickly ceased to be an anonymous person. She established cooperation with the Association of Cracowians in Israel. In 2005, she became the president of this organisation and greatly boosted its activities. Her closest friends and acquaintances included outstanding people of science and culture. The people who helped Lili Haber rediscover Krakow include: Miriam Akavia (born in 1927 in Krakow, died in 2015 in Tel Aviv), writer, translator, Holocaust Survivor, honorary president of the Israel-Poland Society; Natan Gross (born in 1919 in Krakow, died in 2005 in Tel Aviv), screenwriter, director, producer and film historian, writer and publisher; Felicja Karay (born in 1927 in Krakow, died in 2014 in Israel), a history teacher in Kibbutz Rishon LeZion, a Holocaust researcher who conducted seminars at Yad Vashem, and Ryszard Löw (born in 1931 in Krakow), a publicist, publisher, bibliographer and literary critic. The list of people who became Lili Haber's guides to the history and culture of Krakow is, of course, much longer, and should also include such outstanding personalities as: Szoszana Adler, Josef Bau, Josef Bosak, Aryeh Brauner, Zvi Greengers, Ester Stenia Manheim, Nahum and Genia Manor, Emanuel Melcer, Dawid Reiser, Lina Rosenberg, Leopold "Poldek" Wasserman (or Yehuda Maimon) and many others⁵².

In the following years, Lili Haber became known as the organiser and patron of many educational, scientific and cultural events and projects aimed at Polish-Jewish and Polish-Israeli reconciliation and cooperation. In the years 2017–2021, she sat on the social council for the creation of KL Plaszow Memorial Museum. In 2021, the Mayor of Krakow appointed Lili Haber to the Council of the new museum in Krakow. On 21st October 2021, she was awarded the Saint Christopher's Medal in the 9th and 10th edition for building bridges between Israel and Krakow, involvement in the implementation of the KL Plaszow Memorial Museum project and supporting activities carried out as part of the Memory Trail of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow. On 1st November 2022, the Krakow Medical Society (Polish: Towarzystwo Lekarskie Krakowskie, TLK, founded in 1866) awarded Lili Haber the Prof. Józef

51 L. Haber, *Batej Tfila Szene'elmu. Halew Hapoem szel Kehilat Jehudaj Krakow Szhusmeda*, Israel 2021, p. 11.

52 Ibidem.

Bogusz's medal "in gratitude for building Polish-Israeli bridges, editing a monthly magazine in Hebrew connecting former residents of Krakow and their descendants, and for active participation in events commemorating the role of the Jewish community in the economic, social and cultural development of Krakow". The diploma was signed by: Prof. Igor Gościński (chairman of TLK) and Adam Wiernikowski, MD (secretary of TLK)⁵³. The medal and the diploma were presented to Lili Haber in Israel personally by Prof. Aleksander B. Skotnicki.

Lili Haber's biography allows us to trace the process of adaptation of Polish Jews to life in Israel. Through the prism of her family relationships, we gain insight into typical intergenerational differences, but also into discrepancies resulting from the Holocaust experience. Following Lili Haber, we look at the relationships within a family of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust and were thrown by fate into a distant region of the Middle East. We learn about the realities of hastily created camps and housing estates. We take a closer look at the "Polish" district in Holon, and then follow Lili's family to Tel Aviv. We accompany the main protagonist in Israeli kindergarten, school, university and business activities. However, what seems most important is what is intangible and difficult to grasp. The basic thesis of the book, which I devoted to Lili Haber, is about the birth of a new nation. This happened in Israel, where the triad was united: the yishuv, i.e. the Jewish community from the pre-state period, the aliyot, i.e. migration waves coming from different directions, and Holocaust Survivors and their descendants. We are talking here about processes that determined the shape of the state and its nation. When it comes to ground-breaking events, apart from the act of declaring the state's independence, one should mention the subsequent wars, the trial of the Nazi criminal Eichmann, the agreement with West Germany and the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Lili Haber presented her own ranking list: "I think that after the dramatic event of the establishment of the State of Israel and the almost two first decades of mass absorption of new immigrants, three dramatic events took place in Israel that had and still have a strong impact on us: the Six-Day War, the Yom War Kippur and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. These events changed everything and, above all, made us much less optimistic and more realistic and cynical"⁵⁴. The immigrants creating the first aliyot, who came to the Land of Israel, significantly enlarged and supported the Jewish community that had already existed here, and by co-creating it, they built lasting foundations for the future state: political, identity-related, cultural, economic and infrastructural. The proclamation of the independence of the State of Israel on 14th May 1948 was the culmination of those efforts. The arrival of Holocaust Survivors gave the state its ultimate *raison d'être* as a safe haven for Jews from around the world. ■

Fig. 3
Lili Haber with her family,
Israel, September 2022

53 LHA.

54 Correspondence with Lili Haber, 18/06/2023.



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