

Janet Singer Applefield

I was born on June 4, 1935 in Krakow, Poland. My father was one of six brothers and my mother one of three sisters. As the first grandchild in the family, I was very spoiled. I have wonderful and warm memories of living in Nowy Targ, a small town of 2000 people just a few miles from Krakow. There was a fairly large Jewish community with a center and a synagogue. My grandparents owned a hardware/house wares store. The town itself was the hub for the area and was a very busy place. My father was involved in business with my grandfather. There were lots of aunts and uncles and cousins. We often made trips to visit my other grandparents who lived in Wadowice. (That's the same town where the pope was from.) I have very warm recollections of those visits. I remember things like preparing for the Sabbath and getting the house ready, my mother and my grandmother baking challah and cooking. I also remember the religious aspect of our lives. It was very rich with Jewish rituals.

I was four years old when the war broke out. I don't remember the exact day, but I know that my father decided to take my mother and me to my grandparents' house in Wadowice. He told me that the war had started and he thought that we would be safer there; and so we were separated from him and his family for quite a while. I have a recollection of my grandfather packing up the whole household into a wagon with a horse. My aunt and uncle and a little baby cousin, another aunt and uncle loaded as much of their belongings that would fit into the wagon. We started to drive. I remember this long caravan of people heading eastward toward Russia. I also remember airplanes overhead and shooting and that I knew that there was a war going on. People were walking and driving. This trip went on for days and days and days.

We ended up in a town called Winniki with my grandparents. My father was in another car with his brothers and I was told that they went to fight. They were soldiers and joined the Polish military. That didn't last very long because Poland fell within days. Eventually, my mother, my baby sister, and I were reunited with my father who somehow found us. He needed to earn a living and so started to work in a coke (coal) factory. It was here that my little baby sister died from diphtheria as there was no medication. Soon after that, the Russians announced that everyone either had to take out Russian papers and give up their Polish citizenship or go back to Poland. It was a big dilemma for my family. My grandfather, grandmother, one aunt and uncle decided to stay in Russia and ended up in Siberia. My father and my mother chose not to give up their Polish citizenship and everything they had left behind. Everybody thought the war would be over soon. And so they decided to go back. One of my uncles came and picked us up in a truck and we went back home where we were forced to live in a ghetto for a very short time.

At one point, my parents made another attempt to run away. In the middle of the night my father took us in a rented horse and wagon, and we ventured out. I don't know what direction he was heading or what he had in mind, but we were stopped by the Polish police. I recall jumping off the wagon and running into a potato field and hiding. The police came at us with sticks and clubs and turned us back. My parents realized that there was no place to run or to escape. Because of a declaration that on the following day everyone was to be rounded up in the sports stadium, my parents decided that they had to give me away for safe-keeping. They basically knew what was ahead for them. They got in touch with a woman who had been a nurse maid to the children of one of our families. They pleaded with her, gave her some money and she agreed to take me temporarily. And so in the night before they were to go for the roundup, my parents gave me to this woman who took me to her apartment in Krakow. She was half Polish, half German and was called Polechick? I think they had a higher special status than the Poles because they were part German.

I remember being scared, being left alone a lot, not understanding and not knowing what was happening. I felt terribly alone, being locked up in her apartment by myself, especially at night. I also recall one night when a German, a Nazi came and ransacked the apartment. I don't know who or what he was looking for but he just went through her whole apartment, dumped everything out, and then left. Soon after that, maybe several weeks later, the woman took me to the ghetto in Krakow to meet with my father. He told me that he had made arrangements to for me to be transferred over to my cousin. On the day when they were all rounded up, my mother and father made a decision that they were going to separate. They felt that separating might maximize

their chances to live. My mother was taken to a concentration camp and my father to the Krakow ghetto. That was the last time they saw each other. The last time that I saw my mother was when I left with the woman.

And so when my father arrived at the ghetto, knowing that the woman would only care for me for a short time, got in touch with my cousin, a young woman who agreed to take me. My father purchased a birth certificate for me of a deceased Polish child approximately my age from a priest that he met and my new name was Christina Antoszkiewicz. My cousin took me; once again the transfer was done right at the ghetto. Outside of the city, there was a little town. Both she and I had Polish papers. She spoke German fluently. I recall traveling on trolley cars. Germans were permitted to travel in the front part of the trolley and the Poles were supposed to go in the back. But with her fluent German, we always were in the front. She warned me not to talk. From the beginning it was not very pleasant to be with her because for some reason, I don't know why, she was very cruel to me. She would beat me very badly up all the time. I recall having infected fingers from all the bruises that she would inflict on me with the fireplace poker that she used. She had a Polish boyfriend that she saw quite regularly. And I remember the time that she became pregnant and she had an abortion right in the little room in the one-room cottage where we lived. I was there while it was taking place. I also remember having to very often carry heavy packages to the post office for my cousin, and I never knew what they were. I eventually found out years later when I went back to Poland to the town where I lived that my cousin and her boyfriend were involved in the underground. Those packages that I was carrying to the post office contained ammunition being shipped to Russia. The ammunition factory was located behind the boyfriend's shoe factory.

One day, when my cousin was meeting her boyfriend in the city and took me with her. She told me to wait for her across the street from the café where she was to meet him. And so I waited for her in a church right across the street for several hours and she didn't return. When I came out of the church, it was already dark. I was about seven at the time, and so I was crying and she wasn't anywhere around. Then the whole café area was corded off and I was told that the Germans had come in and taken everybody away to the concentration camps. And so she was gone. I was just roaming the streets when a Polish woman found me and took me to her house. I stayed with this woman for several weeks. She lived in an apartment with her husband right above the café. And shortly after, she took me to her family's farm outside of the city in Bronowice where I remained until the end of the war. The cover story that I had so drummed into my head was that I came from Warsaw and my parents were killed in a bombing. And, that was all I would ever say. These people, the Golob family, were wonderful. I guess that they did suspect that I was Jewish, although this was never something that I communicated to them or they mentioned to me.

When the war ended, they took me to the Jewish committee in Cracow and I stayed there with a lot of other kids who came back. A young woman saw us and decided to do something. We were sick; we had no place to go. She eventually gathered all of the children and opened a home in the countryside. A book and movie were made from this story, "The 100 children". Her name was Lena Kucher. We called her matka, "mother," because she was our mother. So I lived there in the home with the other kids until my father came back for me. That was a very interesting, how it happened. He had been looking for me. I had written a letter to my cousin's parents because I knew that they were in Cracow. My father had just arrived and saw the envelope with the name and that's how he found me. And when Lena came back, she said to me, "I have this wonderful news for you." I just remember my reconciliation with my father. It was just how it was in the story. It was very hard for me to love him or to know that I loved him because he was a complete stranger to me. And he was also very frightening looking because he was incredibly thin and sick. I remember feigning affection, sort of hugging him. I didn't know what to feel about this man who came back. And once again my life was being changed. As soon as I got adjusted to one set of circumstances, they changed.

Before being sent to the Plashov, concentration camp, my father was first in the ghetto and worked in a cable factory in Cracow. He told a story that the only thing that kept him alive was the knowledge that I was out there somewhere and he had to live for me. He kept a picture of me on the machine that he was working on. Some of the stories of his experiences were just beyond belief. He was shot and the bullet lodged in his cheek where it remained until the end of the war when it was taken out. From Plashov, he went to Terezin and was liberated from there. Just before the war ended one of his jobs was to burn the bodies.

My father needed time to get better before taking me. He stayed in a rooming house nearby while he recuperated. He was sick and so thin. After about a month, he started regaining his strength and then I went with him. We went back to Nowy Targ. (Lena eventually took the other children to Israel.) Gradually a handful of people from Nowy Targ returned and we all went to live in my grandfather's house. It wasn't wonderful because the Poles were still out to get us. This time it was the Polish underground. We would find threatening notes on the door saying that Hitler didn't complete his job. You're next. I remember sleeping with guns under our pillows. Several of my father's friends were shot and killed. My father tried to earn a living. Everything was gone. There was nothing left. My father and a couple other men started some kind of a candy factory. At that point they knew they had to leave. There was no place for them there. My father gave me the choice to go to America or to go to Palestine. Of course, we had heard such incredible stories about America, I said America and that's where we eventually ended up but went to France first for several months.

My father had one brother in Palestine and another brother who survived and was in the States. He was in Italy when the war broke out, ended up in Shanghai and was a Japanese prisoner of war, eventually coming to this country. We came to New York and lived with my uncle, his wife and her family. But we were on a visitor's visa, which I think was only for 90 days. Unless my father married, we had to leave and would be going to Venezuela. My father decided to find a wife within the 90 days. The family looked around, found him a wife, and he married within that 90 day period. This was 1947. We came in March 25th of 1947, and he was married June 5.

I was a child who just did whatever I was told and adjusted very well. I never really felt. Anything that happened was fine. That was the way I was conditioned to be. So my stepmother was very nice and she was thrilled to have me and eventually adopted me. My father and my stepmother went into business. They worked very hard and life was fine for me. My parents lived for me, virtually, which was not so fine for me. In a sense there was a lot of guilt involved. I felt that I could never upset my parents, never make them suffer. My father went through too much. I could never be the source of his pain. I'm sure there was a lot of denial and not wanting to feel; I couldn't feel for a long, long time. I think eventually after years of trying to figure things out and some therapy, I realized that I had felt abandoned when I was given away. I guess that was the unconscious feeling. It took a long time for me to work through this and acknowledge my feelings.

I never found out what exactly had happened to my mother. On a trip back to Poland, we went to Auschwitz. One of the valises on the top of a pile had my mother's first name, Grace. It's not an uncommon name, but it was a very chilling experience. She could have been killed in Auschwitz or it could have been in Treblinka. I probably could have done some research since I know that the Germans kept very meticulous records. I don't know, there's part of me that just doesn't want to acknowledge what happened to her.

My grandfather, the one that escaped to Russia, survived with my aunt and uncle. My other grandparents, aunts, and uncles did not. That was it. The rest of the family perished. When I went to Poland I found out that my grandmother had been shot. There was a mass grave in the cemetery, and that's where she and my grandfather had run away. Someone had denounced him, someone who had recognized him, and so he was shot, and everybody else also, was killed. My father died in 1978 during open heart surgery. I think the fact that because I have so little family, I find it very difficult, especially around holiday time. I get down around that time. And that's something that my kids have verbalized too. They feel very sad that they don't have any aunts, uncles, and cousins.

I stayed in New Jersey. As I said, my father went into the hardware business with my mother. They worked hard all their life. I could have anything; they wanted to give me everything. I was a normal teenager. I went out, went to college, and got married. I was 19 pretty young. I have 3 children, 33, 29, and 23 and they're terrific. I always shared with my kids. They were always very much part of my life so nothing was withheld from them. Before I went to Poland, my eldest son David made that trip himself. When I went, he also went; the five of us went. It was just very supportive to have him take me to these places. It felt safer.

I did get to see Lena again. I think it was 1954. Lena wrote the book, My 100 children and my father spotted just a little article in the New York Times that she was in this country on a lecture tour so we got in touch with

her and went to visit with her. She was wonderful. She invited me to Israel for a reunion, but sorry to say I didn't go to that. And just a few years ago before the televised version of her book, I met with her again in New York. She was working hard to get this TV program made. It was sad. I was surprised that she had died prior to the airing of the show. But she was a fabulous family.

Thinking back to my childhood, I have no recollection at all of Polish friends, although I had heard my father say that he had Polish friends. I was so young. Basically, I remember the people who worked for the family, the housekeeper and the cook. And I remember them taking care of me, but I don't remember any friends.

Today I am a social worker. I work with kids. It was interesting because I always worked with adults, and this is the first time that I am working with children. I realize that I need to do this, because in a sense, I am replaying my own childhood; it's something that I didn't have a chance to do, so it's important for me to do this for myself. And from that standpoint it's nice that I have the opportunity to do this. Over all, I think that I am very well adjusted. I've thought about that much and what I decided was that I had a very solid rich foundation the first few years of my life and that helped me. And that's what I see with kids that I work with now. Many of these children come from very impoverished backgrounds, but if you can give them something to hold on to, that goes a long way. There is a consistent relationship, and I think that's what helped me when things were bleak knowing that I had that. I couldn't understand what happened to my world. Where did everyone go? Where are they; where are these people that loved me and took care of me? But I still had that sense that they were a part of me and I think that's what made a big difference. .

My father did not believe in general responsibility. He was never a bitter or angry person. And I'm very grateful to him that he gave that to me, because I too just do not hate. I think I may be a better person for that. I previously said that my father always told me that what made him survive was the knowledge that I was there and he needed to live for me. When he was being operated on, he was critical, we were sure he was going to die... that was something I could not understand. I lived for him, he should have lived for me—that was the anger that came through.

I know, I've often thought about the fact that my parents had the strength to make the decision to first separate and then give up a child. I just don't think that I could have done something like that. I probably would have said we'll either live or we'll all die. I just don't think I could've given my kids away. It's just the greatest love that you can imagine.

Several years ago, maybe five, my family and I went back to Poland. All these years I had not been in touch with the people who helped me. I don't know why. I really do not know, because my father was a very loving person and I think it probably had to do with the fact that we didn't want to think about anything in the past. In fact, it's interesting because just several days before the trip I had come across a piece of my writing that told the whole story of my background. I found this raggedy piece of paper with their name, so I did go to visit them. I remember right after the war my father kept asking me please write it down. I was 11 years old and I didn't want to do it. Finally I guess I did.

I found my cousin's boyfriend's brother. It was just so amazing. Nothing really had changed in Poland. People lived where they had lived before. They don't move around like we do here. I brought with me a picture album. I'm very fortunate because for some reason, I don't know how, an entire family picture album was saved and so I had pictures of myself as a child and my whole family. Each time I would come into a town, I would look for an older person and would ask about the past. For instance, I asked about the boyfriend. I only remembered his first name and the person I was speaking with said to me, "Oh sure, you mean..." and he gave the name and he said "He had a shoe factory during the war". I remembered that the brother lived just down the street. They took me to his house and he remembered me and my cousin. He took me right to this little house where I lived. The lady who owned the house came out and she too remembered. When my cousin went on a rampage of hitting me, she would take care of me; she remembered.

(Edited transcription from video recorded in 2008)