

## Raisa (Raja) Kacnelenbogen

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Having emigrated first to Padua and then to Florence, Raisa (Raja) Kacnelenbogen graduated with a degree in medicine in November 1938; she then returned to Lublin with the intention of moving with her father to Palestine. She was not allowed to stay in Italy, as the «measures enacted in defense of the Italian race» issued in the same month foresaw the expulsion of Jewish foreigners (excluding already matriculated students) by March 1939<sup>1</sup>. The young Raisa and her father were unable to leave because of the outbreak of war; they were imprisoned in the Polish city's ghetto and did not survive.

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### A middle-class family in a difficult context

Raisa was born in Lublin (former Russian Empire, part of Poland since 1918) on 22 September 1914 to Izrael (Lublin 1884), an industrialist, and Brakha Rozenberg (Lublin 1883). The city was noted for its Catholic majority and sizable Jewish minority which accounted for 35% of its population in 1931<sup>2</sup>. The wealthy family owned a large building at 24 Lubartowska Street in the Jewish quarter of Podzamcze (the street was to form the western border of Ghetto A)<sup>3</sup>. The building housed his father's margarine factory, flats, offices, shops and also a primary school and a *mikvah*. Izrael also owned a local bank; in the 1920s and 1930s he was elected to the city council as a representative of the Jidisze Fołks-Partaj, an autonomist (not Zionist) Jewish group active in Poland between the wars, and was one of the founders of the «Lubliner Tugblat», Lublin's main Yiddish-language newspaper. His mother Brakha, on

<sup>1</sup> RDL 17 November 1938, n. 1728, *Provvedimenti per la difesa della razza italiana*.

<sup>2</sup> Konrad Sadkowski, *Church, Nation and State in Poland: Catholicism and National Identity Formation in the Lublin Region, 1918-1939*, dissertation, University of Michigan, 1995, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> See The «Grodzka Gate - NN Theatre» Centre, *The Boundaries of the Podzamcze Ghetto* <<https://teatrnn.pl>> (accessed 18 January 2021).

the other hand, was actively involved in Zionist associations and fundraising activities for the Jewish settlement in Palestine<sup>4</sup>. Konrad Bielski, from 1925 a Latin teacher at the Szperowa Gymnasium, remembered attending a graduation party (perhaps Raisa's) at the house in Lubartowska Street:

The school was located in Zamojska Street, in a small one-storey house, and was coeducational, with a significant majority of girls. [...] I remember well my first graduation examination at Szperowa. Due to the lack of a suitable hall, the exam was held on the premises of a Jewish social club on Szopena Street. After graduation, the father of one of the students, Katzenelenbogen [sic], held a party at his house for the graduates and the teaching staff. The party was held in a large flat in his house on Lubartowska Street. The table was laden with various specialities. Lots of chocolates, sweets, cakes, sweet wines and liqueurs. [...]

It was a warm and beautiful June night. I was sitting on the balcony in the company of my pupils. They were talking to me, dreaming, making plans for the future. At that moment I was the only Pole, not only in this large group, but also in the whole house, and I suppose in the whole neighbourhood. At that time I could not predict, I could not imagine even in my worst nightmares what would happen in a few years. That all those who spoke to me at that moment would die a horrible, violent death, that no trace of them would remain and that even the outward appearance of this street would change completely. That I was sitting in a place that would become a cemetery<sup>5</sup>.

### Upbringing and emigration to Italy

In 1933 Brakha emigrated to Palestine with his younger sons Menachem and Awigdor; after a journey through France and Italy, they joined Zehava (Katka), their older sister who had made *aliyah* a few years earlier and was expecting a child<sup>6</sup>. It is not clear whether the second daughter, Chana, had already arrived in Palestine or whether she joined them later; in any case, she was an Israeli citizen like her brothers after the war<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Testimony by Awigdor Kacenenbogen, Tel Aviv, 2006, collected by the Brama Grodzka Centre - Teatr NN <<http://teatrnn.pl>>; for a file on the family see <<http://teatrnn.pl>>; on the building owned by the Kacenenbogen <<https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl>> (accessed 18 January 2021). For an overview see Szymon Rudnicki, *Jews in Poland Between the Two World Wars*, «Shofar. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies», 29, 3, 2011, pp. 4-23.

<sup>5</sup> Testimony of Konrad Bielski reported in *Szkoły w Lublinie*, «Scriptores», 30, 2006, pp. 189-190 <<https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl>> (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of A. Kacenenbogen, cit.

<sup>7</sup> The information is taken from the family page (the surname is indicated as

Raisa attended the humanistic studies division of her local Jewish high school (probably, as mentioned, the Szperowa Gymnasium), and received her diploma in April 1931<sup>8</sup>. Although discriminatory laws were not rigorously enforced at first, strong Anti-semitic tendencies nonetheless pervaded the academic environments in Poland; the request for a *numerus clausus* prompted significant numbers of educated Jewish youth to emigrate from the country<sup>9</sup>.

In 1932-1933 Raisa emigrated to Italy and enrolled in the Facoltà di Medicina e chirurgia at the University of Padua; for the 1934-1935 school year, she transferred to the third year of the Faculty of Florence<sup>10</sup>. She graduated on 21 November 1938, obtaining a grade of 106/110. Her thesis on «Cerebral lipoidosis» addressed a family of rare neurological diseases; among them was the Tay-Sachs syndrome which was known to disproportionately affect the Ashkenazi-Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Her thesis advisor was Mario Zalla, professor and director of the Clinica delle malattie nervose e mentali (linked to the San Salvi mental hospital)<sup>11</sup>.

### Prisoner in the Lublin Ghetto

Raisa was accepted to Santa Maria Nuova Hospital for her semester's clinical

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Katzenellenbogen) at <<https://www.geni.com>> (accessed 30 December 2020).

<sup>8</sup> ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Kacenenbogen Raisa», Italian Embassy in Warsaw, certified translation of Kacenenbogen's high school verbal exam completed on 29 April 1931, dated 27 February 1933; Università di Firenze, registration file, 21 January 1935.

<sup>9</sup> On the forms of discrimination in the Polish university system cf. Steven Paulsson, *Ghetto Benches*, in Richard S. Levy (ed.), *Antisemitism. A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*, vol. 1, Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2005, pp. 275-276.

<sup>10</sup> ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Kacenenbogen Raisa», admission application for her third year of university, not dated; Università di Firenze, Facoltà di Medicina e chirurgia, list of exams, 21 November 1938.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, application for permission to take the graduation exam, 11 October 1938, and minutes of the graduation exam, 21 November 1938. On Tay-Sachs syndrome, documented for the first time by Warren Tay of Great Britain and Bernard Sachs of the United States in two studies respectfully conducted in 1881 and 1898, cf. the file in *Online Mendelian Inheritance in Man (ONIM). An Online Catalog of Human Genes and Genetic Disorders* <<https://omim.org>> (accessed 20 December 2020). On Zalla cf. the entry by Matteo Fiorani, in *Aspi - Archivio storico della psicologia italiana*, section *Protagonisti della storia delle scienze della mente* <<https://www.aspi.unimib.it>> (accessed 20 December 2020).

medicine internship. It is likely that she chose to return to Poland to reconnect with her father Izrael, who had been widowed in August 1938, and to leave with him for Tel Aviv. His father had not wanted to follow his wife to Palestine, but finally decided to leave Poland, partly because of the worsening political climate; father and daughter, however, were unable to leave because of the beginning of the conflict. For Raisa, the bleak prospects of starting a career in Italy as a consequence of the racial legislation must also have been a factor<sup>12</sup>.

During the war she was imprisoned in the Majdan Tatarski ghetto, first established in April 1942 in a neighborhood of Lublin after the larger Podzamcze ghetto was demolished. The Majdan Tatarski ghetto could hold around 8,000 individuals, who were subsequently either killed on the spot or sent to the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp. The last survivors in Lublin were required to do forced labor and they were mostly killed during the Aktion Erntefest («Harvest Festival»), which took place between 3 and 4 November 1943<sup>13</sup>.

Raisa was a prisoner along with her father Izrael, who was a member of the ghetto Judenrat; presumably other relatives were also arrested. Neither of them survived the extermination<sup>14</sup>. The young Raisa's name, accompanied by

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<sup>12</sup> ASUFI, AC, SS, f. «Kacenenbogen Raisa», application for an internship with professor Terzani, 18 November 1938. For the date of her mother's death cf. file registered to *Bracha Katzenellenbogen* at <<https://www.geni.com>> (accessed 30 December 2020); see also the testimony of A. Kacenenbogen, cit., who places her mother's death in August 1938 or 1939.

<sup>13</sup> Her and her father's names are included in *List of Jews from Lublin and the Lublin Vicinity Who Were Inmates in the Majdan Tatarski Ghetto, 09/1942*, available online in *The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names*, under name <<https://yvng.yadvashem.org>> (accessed 20 December 2020). On the Majdan Tatarski Ghetto see the entry in *The «Grodzka Gate - NN Theatre» Centre* <<https://teatrnn.pl>> (accessed 20 December 2020) and Jakub Chmielewski, *The Establishment of the Ghetto at Majdan Tatarski and the First Selection Among the Jews in KL Lublin*, 20 April 2020, in the portal *The State Museum at Majdanek* <<http://www.majdanek.eu>> (accessed 20 December 2020). For a general overview Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York, HarperCollins, 1992; Yitzhak Arad, *Operation Erntefest («Harvest Festival»)*, in Id., *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps. Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, revised and expanded edition, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 421-425; Stefan Klemp, «Aktion Erntefest». *Mit Musik in den Tod: Rekonstruktion eines Massenmords*, Münster, Geschichtsort Villa ten Hompel, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> See the Pages of Testimony in *The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names* <<https://yvng.yadvashem.org>> (accessed 20 December 2020), concerning Raja and Yisrael

her qualifications as a neurologist, appears in the list of about 2,500 *Polish Martyred Physicians* published by the Medical Alliance of New York in 1963<sup>15</sup>.

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(Izrael), signed by Menachem Kacenenbogen. According to this source, the father died in Majdanek. For the different ways of transcribing first and last names (Raja Katzenellenbogen) cf. also <<https://www.geni.com>> (accessed 30 December 2020). For the participation in the Judenrat see the testimony of A. Kacenenbogen, *cit.*

<sup>15</sup> The database can be consulted at <<https://www.jewishgen.org>> (access upon registration 20 December 2020). Raisa has the record number 969. The original version of the list can be found in Louis Falstein (ed.), *The Martyrdom of Jewish Physicians in Poland*, New York, Exposition Press-Medical Alliance-Association of Jewish Physicians from Poland, 1963).

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