

# INTERVIEW MET RACHEL LEA KESSELMAN

PRESIDENT-FOUNDER OF "YIDDELE' MEMORY"  
YOUNG CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS' ORGANIZATION  
THE FIRST JEWISH OPEN AIR MUSEUM IN EUROPE

DOOR CARLO SCHREIBER

*Szalom Rachel Lea Kesselman. I was impressed to discover that you created the First Jewish Open Air Museum in Europe. You opened it on last June 2nd 2014 in presence of the Ambassador of Israel to Poland, Tsvi Rav-Ner, the Ambassador of Argentina to Poland, Patricia Salas, the former-Ambassador of Argentina to France, your cousin Fernando Gelbard (whose father was born in Radomsko and who became Minister of Economy under President Peron), the representant of the Polish Minister of Culture, the Great Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich (Member of Honor of your Association "Yiddele' Memory"), the first Counselor of the German Embassy Mr Reinl, the first Secretary of the French Embassy Jonathan Boffy representing his Excellency Pierre Böhler, the Authorities of the City and of the Region of Radomsko, the Deputy-Director of "Polin", the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Zygmunt Stepinski, the Chief Specialist Portal of "Virtual Shtetl" Krzysztof Bielawski (both virtual partners of "Yiddele' Memory") and guests from France, Israel, United States, Germany, Argentina and indeed descendants of Radomskers... Awesome !*

## Tell us more about your Project:

### Where is Radomsko and why did you chose this very city in Poland?

Radomsko is at equal distance between Warsaw and Kraków, 2 hours south from Warsaw by the highway.

Radomsko is one of the oldest city in Poland (1266) but most of all, this is where my father was born in 1921, z"l, and also where he spent the war, hiding himself and his family underground in the forest for 28 months. A horrible experience with prehistorical conditions. So, all my childhood, all my life, I've heard my father speaking about Radomsko. That was a magic name for me. Magic and tragic. All at the same time.

However, 7 months after the end of the war, 2 Poles entered in his family home and killed his mother and his little sister Dvorele on the eve of Tisha bé Av 1945, just one civil year after his father passed away in der wald bunker. Therefore my Dad and his siblings ran away and never came back to Poland.

All my life, I would totally agree with Daddy and I thought that I will never put one foot in Poland either. But 3 years ago, in September 2011, a good friend living in New York invited the Directors of the "Shoah Foundation" of S. Spielberg to meet with me at his place and to try to develop my Organization "Yiddele' Memory". Steven Smith asked me if I had ever been to Poland. I proudly answered that I hadn't and that I will not. He said that if there was still one slim chance to meet someone who knew my family and who is now about 85-90 years old, I should go there quickly because with old people, every month counts. And if I don't do it now, I will always regret.

During the same week, thanks to a very dear Member of Honor of "Yiddele' Memory", Israeli Ambassador Avi Pazner, I could meet his friend Professor Elie Wiesel, with whom I shared one meaningful hour. Professor Wiesel also advised me the same thing, saying that I shouldn't think too much but just go to Poland and never have regrets.

Two same advices by wise people in only one week, it looked like "min hashama'im"... So I listened to them and on the following Monday, I was in Poland, in the Jewish Community of Łódź! (and I greet the very sympatisch Rabbi of Łódź, Symcha Keller).

On Tuesday morning, I arrived in Radomsko and when I saw the big panel "RADOMSKO" on Narutowicza St, all my fear and all my hate suddenly disappeared. I just thought "jestem w domu!" ("I'm home") – and thinking in Polish by then was a miracle!

I must say that haKadosh Baruh only put very good people on my way.

On this very first day, I went to the Jewish cemetery, I prayed in the Ohel of Tsidkenu Tiferes Shloimo z"l, I discovered the big beautiful house of my grandparents z"l, I even met their maid Krysia, who is 89 years old and who told me so many details! An old man even brought me to the forest where my family hid and to Gniotek's house, the Righteous among the Nations who helped my family at the end of the war. His granddaughter Ela still lives in this humble house and as soon as we met, we couldn't speak, we just fell in



each other's arms and cried. We knew... All that on my very first day!

Besides, my father always spoke about the Shoah, his outstanding experience (of which I inherited much strength and enthusiasm) but he would rarely speak about the town itself. So when I entered in the city, I was amazed that it was so lovely, like on a postcard, a movie set, with the charming main place (Rynek), so many flowers, beautiful old buildings with typical Jewish style. And don't ask me how, but I could recognize the city, the streets... I felt comfortable immediately. I even spent Yom Kippour praying in the garden of my grandparents !

### **How and when did you have the idea to create such a different Jewish Museum, something that doesn't exist anywhere else ?**

One year later in October 2012, I came back to Radomsko. Meantime, I learnt basic Polish in Argentina within 3 intensive weeks with a private teacher and with my Auntie Cesia z"l (who was also from Radomsko) to make a surprise to the people that I knew there, especially to my Jewish friends in Radomsko.

But I was also surprised myself that the Regional Museum organized a Yiddish Opera to commemorate the 1st liquidation of the ghetto, on October 9th. That was the sad 70th Anniversary. That was very honorable of them. And they even invited me as guest of Honor.

Two days later, the most improbable event happened : Radomsko is twinned with the Israeli city Kiryat Bialik (how amazing!). The City Hall also created a Pomnik (a Macewa) in the middle of the town, commemorating the deportation of the Jews.

What was my surprise to see 200 Israeli students, all wearing blue jeans and white T-shirts, the Israeli flag floating in the air close to the Polish flag, and all singing haTikva!!!

The emotion was so strong that I could only cry, imagining my father and his friends from Hashomer Hatzair singing in the streets of Radomsko, thousands of Hassidim going to the court of Tiferes Shloimo z"l, seeing the Rabbi's house at one corner of Joselewicza St where we were standing, and the Gmina Żydowska (Kehila) at the other corner! That was so moving!!

I regretted that Daddy, Pinck Szpiro, Abramek Gliksman, my uncles Idek i Cesia were not there to see that! What a change of mentality in Poland 2012!

I was introduced to the Mayor and she hugged me so nicely!

After the evening at EMDEK (Dom Kultury) where Israeli songs and Jewish culture had been showed, I came back at my Jewish friends's place and I thought that Radomsko deserved a Jewish cultural Project. But which one?

As I was thinking, I was looking at my computer and I saw the folder with pictures of Jewish buildings in Radomsko. And suddenly, it clicked to me: I will show the Jewish Life in Radomsko through the buildings!

There was 6 years of Holocaust in Poland. But let's not forget that there was 1000 years of Jewish presence! And that the Jews strongly contributed to the architectural style and to the economic, social, and cultural life of Poland.

Jewish pre-war LIFE, this is what I wanted to show to all the people coming to Poland.

I made a quick draft and in November 2012, on a 3rd trip, I proposed my idea to the Starosta of Radomsko (Prefect). He loved it and passed the Project to the Mayor who was also very enthusiastic. The Project has been accepted within a month. I couldn't believe it!

### **What is an "Open Air Museum"?**

You know that Hitler, yimar shemo, said that to see a Jew in Europe, one will have to enter in a Museum. And unfortunately, he succeeded in his evil project. There are Jewish Museums in Paris, Berlin, now in Warsaw, where you can see interesting artifacts and pictures of Jewish culture in Europe.

In Warsaw city, I had been disappointed to visit the Jewish tour to discover... most of the time, nothing. "Here was a Jewish Hospital, here was the Jewish School, here was the Jewish Community". You arrive at the address and there is properly no building at all or a ruin.

In Radomsko, all the buildings are still in place. 80% of Radomsko has been built through Jewish initiative during the 18th and 19th century. Almost 50% of the inhabitants were Jewish before WWII. So this is a great pleasure to be in such a city where you feel the Jewish presence and you know that you walk in their steps!

An Open Air Museum in Radomsko means that you don't need to enter in a Museum. All the city of Radomsko is now a Jewish Museum!

### **How did you operate?**

I spent 18 months of intensive researches in Łódź, in Piotrków Trybunalski, in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, in Radomsko proper, in numerous public institutions. I read the 630 pages of the Yizkor Bukh in Yiddish and in Hebrew and G'od bless Mrs Gloria Berkensztat-Freund who translated the Yizkor Bukh of Radomsko in English on Internet! That was a great help.

I printed the English version and I filled every pages with really thousands of "post-it" of different forms and colors, depending on which information. Most important, I was looking for correct addresses and I always had to check with the metrical books and the pre-war addresses of people, referring to the official books of the Starostwo (Prefektura) of Radomsko. I gathered more than 4000 archives about Radomsko.

Once everything has been found, I made 50 plates (tabliczka) of marbles of 60 x 50 cms and they indicate the Jewish places in Radomsko, in English and in Polish, directly in the pavement in front of each Jewish building. They show the social institutions (Linas haTsedek, Beth Lekhem, JNF...), the Jewish Schools, the khederim, kosher restaurants, Jewish Bank, Jewish Hotels, Talmud Torah, Beis Midrash, Mykvé, Jewish Sport Clubs (haPoel, haKoah...), political parties like Poalei Tzion left and right, Jewish libraries, notable Jewish personalities who come from Radomsko... The Project is very complete.

### **Why is this project so important for you?**

This is my baby, my roots and my descendant at the same time. Not only I will leave a cultural trace in this world but the 18.000 Jews of Radomsko, the 3rd most important Jewish Hassidic community of Poland will be remembered for ever. They have not been gassed and cremated to be forgotten, G'od forbid.

This project is important not only for me. You, me, every Jew in the world is connected to Radomsko every Friday evening : before the Kidush, when we sing "Shalom Alekhem", welcoming the Angels, we honor HaTsedik Shloimo haCohen Rabinowicz (better known as "Tiferes Shloimo") who wrote and composed this song in 1866. ZirHono li vruHe. I owe him a lot. Besides, I had at heart to inaugurate the Museum on June 2nd because it was my father's birthday, z"l, and he, who so much suffered in Radomsko, but who was such a brilliant man all his life, even after such a tragedy, deserved to be honored in his hometown. A pozitiv nekuime! What most prestigious present could I ever offer to my personal Tzadik who guides my life ?

Plus, singing with the Great Chief Rabbi of Poland "Adon Olam" on the Radomsker air, leading together the 65 Guests on the way to my grandparents' house in Radomsko, on my father's birthday, this is surely a surrealistic moment that I'll never forget in my life!



### **How many people are working for you?**

I humbly say that I did everything alone. Lack of time, strong will and much energy have been the ingredients of this adventure.

I only hired a very smart Pole, Jacek Bednarek, who helped me in the archives for one month.

But 18 months of researches and literature, I had to do alone.

Every person and help is now welcome to join the Project. There is still a lot to do and I cannot finance everything myself.

I have very nice Members of Honor who introduce me to the right people from time to time and I'd like to give them kuived here: The Great Chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, so adorable for his attachment with the Radomskers, and also a marvelous man for his dedication with every Jewish project in Poland, Avi Pazner, former Ambassador and porte-parole of Israel, who actively participated to my first conference in 2010, My dear cousin Fernando Gelbard, former Ambassador of Argentina to France, a very helpful member, Philip Bialowitz, the youngest survivor of Sobibor extermination camp, USA, a wonderful "grandpa of adoption" who opened so many doors for me in Poland!

Martin Gray, survivor of Treblinka, author of "For those I loved", France, Pr. Benjamin Gross, Professor of Philosophy, Harvard (USA) and Bar Ilan, Israel, José Moskowitz, Worldwide President of "Sherit haPleita", Argentina (who passed away on November 30th 2014 z"l), Rabbi Skorka and Rabbi Kiesel, Argentina, Eugenia de Unger, co-Founder of the Holocaust Museum in Argentina, Dame Suzanne Perlman, England.

I thank them all for their moral support. I would also remind the memory of a very dear friend, Joseph Domberger, z"l, former President of Bnai Brith Europe who was fond of my project.

### **What do you wish to achieve?**

I want to show the Jewish pre-war life in Poland and to remind people that before the Holocaust, the Jews were living in Poland.

Poland is not only a ground where we suffered, where we've been murdered, where we hid.

Poland is the ground of our ancestors, where the Jews laughed, sang, were going to weddings, had children, were studying Torah, celebrated the Holidays...

I hope that the Marches of the Living, before to go to Auschwitz or to Treblinka, will come for 3 days in Radomsko to visit the Open Air Museum, a typical Jewish city of southern Poland that shows the vibrant Jewish past to the next generations. So our beloved ones will live again and forever in their heart. This world is not anymore... But in Radomsko, you can concretely imagine it and walk in their steps.

The cultural brochure is being prepared and will be downloadable from the website of "Yiddele' Memory" from February b"h.

The First Anniversary of the Museum in next June 2015 will be the occasion to gather more people and more Medias. Everybody is welcome to join! Just contact me before PessaH. Szalom véléhitraot in Radomsko!