Chapter 1

Jędrzejów 2012

The return trip to Jędrzejów took sixty-six years, almost to the day. Jędrzejów is a small, rather ordinary town with no outstanding features and, if nothing else, its unpronounceable name makes it an unlikely destination for tourists. And yet this was a journey I had to make, even though I could not fully articulate the reasons.

The pretext was the reclamation by our family, through a lengthy legal process, of my grandparents' property and the important decisions which subsequently had to be made. Probably these matters could have been dealt with from a distance and did not justify what I knew would be a painful experience. And yet, I needed to go. Jędrzejów was my mother Hadassa's birthplace, and briefly our home, in the aftermath of the Shoah, the Holocaust. In my mind, it is forever the epitome of what had been lost.

Little did I know just how much had been lost. Two things struck me. The first was how small and neglected the town appeared and the second was that there was no vestige of Jewish life. Where were the butchers, the *cheders*, the cemetery, the *shuls*, the *mezuzzot* on the doors? There was no reminder of the decades of rich Jewish culture, no reminder of what was if not a warm, at the least a civilised relationship, with their non-Jewish neighbours. I could feel no connection, no sense of belonging to what was around me – only a huge emptiness. My history, both personal and that of all Jędrzejów Jews, had disappeared. There was nothing but a sharp awareness of the void and of the loneliness. I was here; but where

were all the other people who belonged here with me? Obliterated; all obliterated.

In Jędrzejów, which before the war had a significant Jewish presence, where my grandfather Moshe Wargoń made his mark as a city councillor, there was no sign, no whisper of a Jewish existence. 'There,' said our Polish companion, pointing down a narrow street, 'that's where the ghetto was.' How could that be? This was just an ordinary narrow street. This could not possibly be the place where the Jews of Jędrzejów were herded, where they suffered and were humiliated, and from where they had ultimately been taken to their deaths at Treblinka.

And then it became clear why I had to come back. It was to re-establish, in whatever small way possible, the existence here of Jews. To create a footprint, however minute, that said we were once here and our presence mattered.

For complicated reasons, and much against my daughter's and my own will, our family property had to be sold. I needed to see my mother's house while we still owned it. I needed to walk in the yard where I once had played and to say to myself, 'Jews once again own this property.' The sale was emotionally wrenching but made somewhat less so by my insistence, once I arrived and saw the complete desolation of Jewish life, that a clause in the contract ensured that a plaque would be affixed in perpetuity to the building of my grandparents' home. And thus, even though I had already returned to Melbourne by the time the plaque was in place, in 2012 in Jędrzejów the Yiddish language finally made its reappearance, albeit in a very minor way. This was not merely an assertion of our presence. It was an assertion of the triumph of our survival.

There is now a plaque on the building at what once was ulica (street) Klasztorna No. 9-11 and is now ulica 11 Listopada No. 15, which says in Polish and Yiddish:

W tym domu w latach 1915–1939 mieszkał wraz z
żona Chają Ruchlą oraz rodziną Moszek Mordka
Wargoń – radny miasta Jędrzejowa w latach
1933–39.

Dla uczezenia ich pamięci tablicę ufundowała
wnuczka Janina Bassat (z domu Katz)

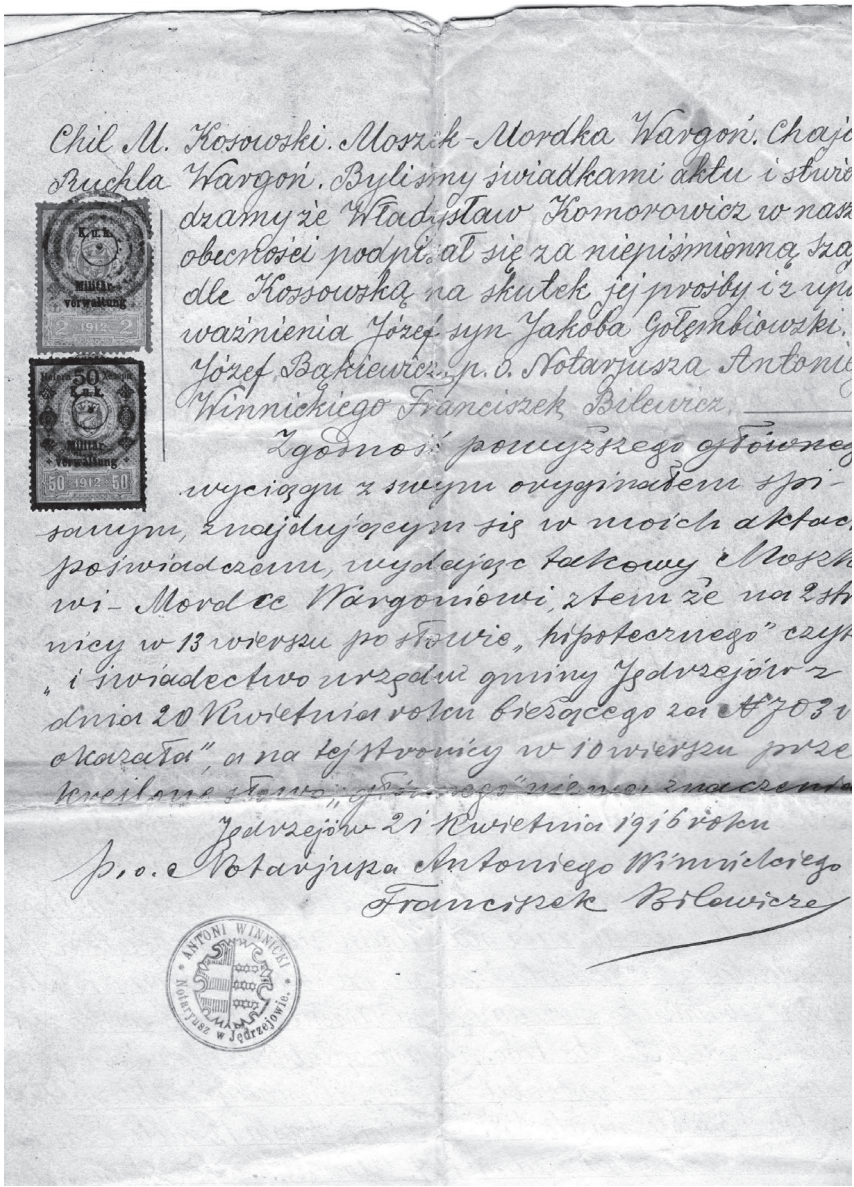
אין די יאָרן צווישן 1915 און 1939 האָט אין דעם הויז געווינט
משהמרדכי וואַרגאָן – יעדזשעיוווו שטאָט ראַטמאַן בעת די
יאָרן 1933–1939, מיט זײַן פרוי חיה רחל און מיט
זײַן משפחה. דער שילד איז געלייגט געוואָרן דורך זײַן אייניקל
יאַנינאַ באַסאַט (געבוירן – קאַץ) אין זייער אָנדענק

This translates to: Moszek Mordka Wargoń, Councillor of Jędrzejów from 1933–1939 lived in this house together with his wife Chaja Ruchla and his family in the years 1915 to 1939. In memory of the above, this plaque was laid by their granddaughter Janina Bassat (née Katz).

Thirty-seven words in Polish; forty-eight words in Yiddish – not a huge monument; but to my mind, a quantum leap towards recognition and away from obliteration.

Bob and Nina Bassat, Jędrzejów, 2012

Nina Bassat, outside the Wargoń property, Jędrzejów, 2012



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