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SAMUEL 1923–2016 WILLENBERG

HERO OF TWO NATIONS

1

SON OF A PAINTER AND A NURSE

Samuel Willenberg was born in 1923 in Częstochowa. His father, Perec Willenberg, was an artist, known primarily for his frescoes in synagogues in Częstochowa, Piotrków Trybunalski and Opatów. His mother, Maniefa Popow, was a Russian, originally an orthodox Christian, who converted to Judaism after her marriage to Perec.

My father was an artist, a painter. At the time of my birth, he worked as an art teacher in a local Jewish school. He stopped teaching when he was commissioned to paint a ceiling in an old synagogue.

R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

Mother of Igo [Samuel] Maniefa read novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz; she loved his descriptions of the Polish countryside and longed to see Poland with her own eyes. One of her friends, a German girl, invited Maniefa to spend the 1914 summer holidays with her family in Częstochowa. The girls were sixteen years old at the time. The outbreak of the First World War when they were staying in Poland meant that they could not return to Russia. She could not stay with her friend's family. Maniefa qualified as a nurse and started work in a local hospital."

Ada Krystyna Willenberg, unpublished interview with Magdalena Pajkowska and Małgorzata Łukasiewicz-Traczyńska, Tel Aviv, 27.06.2022

Maniefa read novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz; she loved his descriptions of the Polish countryside and longed to see Poland with her own eyes.

Photos:

- 1.1 Perec Willenberg (b. 1874–d. 1947) at work in the Old Synagogue Częstochowa, c. 1929. Family archive
- 1.2 Perec Willenberg and his son Samuel, c. 1929. Family archive
- 1.3 Maniefa Willenberg, nee Popow (1887–1973) and her daughter Ita (1919–1942), c. 1923. Family archive
- 1.4 Maniefa Willenberg (second left) at an operating theatre in the hospital founded by the Jewish Charity Association *Dobroczytność*, Częstochowa, 1918. Family archive
- 1.5 Maniefa Popow (first right) and her parents, brothers and a cousin, Russia, c. 1910. Family archive

2

A LITTLE RASCAL FROM CZĘSTOCHOWA

I was known as a boy willing to fight with everybody and against everybody [...] When Alfred, one of the boys from our street, was attacked by some local hooligans, I protected him many times. He was younger than me, we became friends.

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 17

Alfred Böhm was born in Germany, in a Jewish family from Poland. In the 1930s his family, with others like them, was deported to Poland. They settled in Częstochowa.

I had many Polish friends. Our building in ulica Fabryczna was a mixed, Jewish and Polish, neighbourhood. We lived and played together, always. When a circus came to town, we also created one in our yard. I would be a lion, as I had long hair. Maniek, Muniek, it was all so familiar.

S. Willenberg "Igo", Oral History Archive podcast, Warsaw Uprising Museum, 01.08.2005

I protected him [Alfred Böhm] many times. [...], we became friends.

Photos:

- 2.1 The Old Synagogue in Częstochowa, before 1939; Perec Willenberg planned and carried out its internal renovation in the years 1928–1929. Wikimedia Commons
- 2.2 Sanctuary and Monastery on Jasna Góra, Częstochowa, 1928. NAC, Henryk Poddębski photo archive
- 2.3 Samuel Willenberg, aged 12, out for a walk with his family members, Częstochowa, 1935. Family archive

3

BROTHER OF ITA AND TAMARA

Samuel Willenberg had two sisters, Ita and Tamara.

When the war broke out Ita was twenty years old, Samuel was sixteen, and Tamara, the youngest in the family, was only three. Ita was very pretty, with dark hair, and not very Jewish looks. Little Tamara had blond hair.

When Ita was thirteen, she started going out with a boy of sixteen. Theirs was a true love from childhood, they were planning to get married. Ita's fiancé emigrated to Palestine in 1936, and some time later, in 1939, he had finally organised all the formalities to have his brother and Ita join him, but the outbreak of the 2nd World War put a stop to that.

We found him after the war – the first thing we did when we came to Israel.

Ada Krystyna Willenberg, unpublished interview with Magdalena Pajkowska and Małgorzata Łukasiewicz-Traczyńska, Tel Aviv, 27.06.2022

*Theirs was a true love
from childhood, they were
planning to get married.*

Photos:

- 3.1 Ita Willenberg and her fiancé Szmul Kamrat, Warsaw, 1936.
Family archive
- 3.3 Ita Willenberg (left) with her sister Tamara (1936–1942) and a friend,
Warsaw, 1938. Family archive
- 3.2 Samuel, Ita and Perec Willenberg, Częstochowa, 1935.
Family archive
- 3.4 Ita and Tamara Willenberg Warsaw, 1938. Family archive

4

SOLDIER IN THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN

In September 1939, at the age of sixteen, Samuel volunteered to join the Polish Army. He was badly wounded in the battle with the Russians [who had invaded Poland from the east on the 17th of September] near Chełm.

[...] [before the war] we were living in Radość, a suburb of Warsaw. [...] When in September [1939] the president of the city of Warsaw asked the Warsaw youth to go east, I followed the order.

In Ryki, I met a platoon of soldiers who suggested that we join them. Being always a bit crazy, I did, and suddenly I found myself a soldier in the Polish Army. When we got to Kovel, we learnt of the Soviet invasion on Poland, of how they knifed Poland in the back, and, under the Soviet fire, we had to retreat [...] in the direction of Hrubieszów and Chełm. We were stationed at the Dauman refinery in Chełm, when the Russians suddenly started to approach [...] regular exchange of fire commenced. We were behind a barricade, the Soviets on the other side. [...] An artillery shell hit me.

S. Willenberg "Igo", Oral History Archive podcast, Warsaw Uprising Museum, 01.08.2005

R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

With my legs temporarily paralysed, I found myself in a military hospital which had been taken for a while by the Russians. It turned out that according to the Ribbentrop pact they had advanced too

far and so they retreated, leaving the place to the Germans. When the Germans marched in, the hospital doctors discharged us straight away so that we wouldn't be captured by them. I got home [in Radość, near Warsaw] somehow, my legs covered in septic wounds.

R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

*The Russians suddenly started to approach [...]
An artillery shell hit me.*

Photos:

- 4.1 The Royal Castle in Warsaw after shelling by German artillery, 17 September 1939. Wikimedia Commons
- 4.2 The map from the secret appendix to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact showing the new German-Soviet border. The map is signed by Joseph Stalin and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. Note Stalin's signature on the border correction east of Rzeszow and south of Zamosc. (Genuine photo is colour) 28 September 1939 (document), 1946 (photo). Wikimedia Commons
- 4.3 Dismounted Polish cavalrymen at the battle of Kock, 2–6 October 1939. Wikimedia Commons

5 GHETTO

In January 1940 the Willenberg family moved to the ghetto in Opatów, where Perec had been engaged in the painting of the local synagogue interiors since 1936.

On the first of January 1940, we all escaped to Opatów, to join my dad. He did little landscape paintings, and I would ramble around nearby villages to exchange them for eggs, or chicken, or milk, my sister gave private lessons to school children, our mother attended to the sick - life was not too bad. [...] The Opatów ghetto was not initially a closed ghetto, it was an open district.

S. Willenberg, R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

As a Russian, Samuel's mother was the only one in the family who had "Aryan" papers. The rest of them had Jewish papers. When in 1942 a rumour started that the Germans were going to deport Jewish citizens somewhere, a friend of Perec, engineer Karbowniczek, helped the Willenberg family get baptismal certificates in church. They decided to separate. Perec moved to Warsaw under the assumed name of Karol Baltazar Pękostawski and earned money as a picture painter. Meanwhile Samuel and his mother were organising a move of the rest of the family to Częstochowa. They went to Maniefa's friend, who found a room near Jasna Góra for them.

Mother and I left the girls there and went back to Opatów to get the rest of our things. Ita was then 24 years old, and Tamara was 6. We got to the house and found the landlady in the doorway, shouting 'They were Jewish, the police have taken them!'

They had been betrayed... [...] I am crying now, and I was crying then with my mother. We went to the park near Jasna Góra, we sat on the bench, and we were sobbing. Mother told me to run away. I went back to Opatów.

R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

They were Jewish; the police have taken them!

Photos:

- 5.1 Opatów, 1918, the Collegiate church in the background. Photo: Jerzy Nowicki, Archive of the Institute of Art, PAN
- 5.2 17th Century synagogue in Opatów, the so-called Tall Synagogue (jid. Di Hojhe Szil), devastated by the Germans in WW2; Percec Willenberg worked on its interior from 1936. Photo: W. Oleś, archive of the Institute of Art, PAN
- 5.3 Samuel Willenberg's sisters, Ita and Tamara, before the war. Family archive

6

SAVED FROM DEATH

On the 23rd of October 1942 Samuel Willenberg, together with many inhabitants of the Opatów ghetto, was brought to Treblinka extermination camp.

Tell them that you are a bricklayer

I was standing in Treblinka between two barracks when some youths with red armbands came up to me and handed me some strings – I was to take my shoes off and join them into a pair with this string. I seemed to recognize the face of the one who handed me the string and asked him, 'Where are you from?'; and he asked the same of me, 'And you?' 'Częstochowa, Warsaw, Opatów...'. 'What's your name?'. 'Samuel Willenberg', I answered. 'Samek it's you?! Tell them that you are a bricklayer', he said and walked away. After a short time, an SS man appeared, shouting: 'Wo ist der Maurer? ['Where is the bricklayer?'] [...] I became a prisoner at Treblinka. [...] On the same day seven thousand people were gassed at Treblinka. Whole Opatów.

S. Willenberg "Igo", Oral History Archive podcast, Warsaw Uprising Museum, 01.08.2005

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 14

The prisoner who saved Samuel from death was Alfred Böhm, his childhood friend from Częstochowa.

You must escape from here!

[On his first night in the camp, in the barracks, Samuel heard a familiar voice:]

'Is this you, Willenberg?' [...]

'Who are you?' I asked. [...]

In the half-dark room, I recognized the nice, gentle face of my history teacher, Mr Mering. [...]

He sat on the edge of my sack and started asking about my family. [...] Suddenly, [...] he whispered to me: [...] 'You have good Aryan looks, you speak with a good accent!' [...] 'You must escape from here in order to tell the world what you have seen here and what you will still see.'

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 23, 24, 25

Photos:

- 6.1 Sketch by Samuel Willenberg of the west part of the camp. Photo: Good Grounds Foundation
- 6.2 Deportation of Jews from the Siedlce ghetto to Treblinka extermination camp, 1942. Wikimedia Commons

7

PRISONER OF TREBLINKA

When the war broke out my sister Tamara was three years old, so in 1942 she was six. She had only one coat to wear so my mum had to lengthen the sleeves and the hem by sewing pieces of bright green, almost fluorescent, fabric onto them. This was very striking. When I was put to the task of sorting the heap of clothes, I saw Tamara's coat, and underneath it, [...] Ita's skirt with a flowery pattern. They, my sisters, must have been together till the end [...]

R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 77

*In December 1942 I saw
in a heap of clothes [in the
camp] items of clothing
belonging to my sisters.*

7.1 *Treblinka is in me*, authors: Jerzy Traczyński, Krzysztof Żurowski, production Dobry Grunt Foundation, duration 5'10"

Visit www.samuelwillenberg.org/en/film
or scan the QR code to watch the film (5 min 10 sec)



8

REVOLT AND ESCAPE

Hell has burned!

On the 2nd of August 1943 a revolt broke out in Treblinka. For months prisoners had been plotting it. They had managed to make a key to the weapons storage and on the day of the revolt arms were distributed amongst the prisoners. About 4.30 in the afternoon, they started shooting and burning down storages full of petrol. Treblinka was on fire. Samuel Willenberg and about two hundred other prisoners managed to escape. Sixty-seven of the escapees would survive the war.

I easily skipped over the dam which was covered with the corpses of my mates. Suddenly I felt a tug, [...] the bullet hit my leg. I got to the tracks limping, [...] 'Hell has burned! Hell has burned!' I was shouting frenetically.

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 165

Unlike my companions' parents, my mother and father were still alive. My leg had been injured, but I managed to get near the railway station in Kostki, near Sokołów Podlaski. The shopkeeper there, a Polish girl, warned me that the Germans were looking for the escapees, recognizable by their shaved heads or very short hair. This girl gave me twenty zloty with which I wanted to buy cigarettes and matches right away, but she said: 'You won't have enough left for your train ticket' and didn't charge me for the cigarettes. I spent the night sleeping in a field

and in the morning limped on my swollen leg to the railway station.

S. Willenberg, R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

In the train Samuel met an old lady, who offered him accommodation in Rembertów, taking him for an escaped Polish soldier from a prisoner of war camp. Her son, who was a szmalcownik (person who blackmailed Jews in hiding), not knowing about his origins, got him false "Aryan" papers under the name of Ignacy Popow. His nickname "Igo" was used during the occupation and later.

[...] His room took me back to my childhood, with its smells of paint and turpentine.

In Częstochowa I learnt from acquaintances there that my father had moved to Warsaw. So I went, just like that, to the town hall [in Warsaw] and there some German clerk told me that Karol Baltazar Pękostałowski's address was ulica Grójecka no 104! It turned out that the janitor of the building had got these false, but quite legal, papers for my father! The only problem was that, although he didn't look Jewish, my father spoke Polish rather badly, with a thick Jewish-Russian accent. It was therefore written in his papers that he was mute. So, I found him...I can't talk about our meeting even now...It was incredible, his room took me back to my childhood, with its smells of paint and turpentine. And all around the room there were easels with holy pictures on them: Maria and Jesus... I said to him: 'Dad, you are painting Jews again!

S. Willenberg, R. Mazurek, R. Pawlak, *Tamara's coat, Ita's skirt*, in *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus Minus, online version 12.05.2012

One day open lorries came to a nearby building in ulica Grójecka no 84. A great number of German policemen entered the gate and the yard behind. They returned with over thirty people whom they had found and arrested. I learnt later that night that there was in the grounds of the building a greenhouse, under which the gardener had constructed a hiding place for Jews to live. All the Jews in hiding and the gardener and the gardener's family were eventually shot against the wall of the ghetto, in the Pawiak prison. Amongst them was a prominent Jewish historian, Emanuel Ringelblum, and his wife.

After this event our landlord asked us to leave. We found a man with a two-wheel cart and put all our belongings in it.

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 209, 210

Photos:

- 8.1 *Prisoners' Revolt*, sculpture in bronze by Samuel Willenberg, 2002–2003. Photo: Agnieszka Traczyńska
- 8.2 Treblinka extermination camp II ablaze, 2 August 1943, photographed surreptitiously by Franciszek Ząbecki, employee of the Treblinka railway station. Wikimedia Commons Jewish History Institute archive
- 8.3 Samuel Willenberg shortly after his escape from Treblinka. Photo taken in August 1943. Family archive
- 8.4 Perec Willenberg at work, c. 1945–47. Family archive
- 8.5 Samuel Willenberg moves out of the apartment in ulica Grójecka 104 in Warsaw, being watched from the window by his father; photo taken by a family friend named Hanka Kursa. Family archive
- 8.6 Samuel Willenberg, always full of good humour, next to a junction manhole that served for a while as his hiding place; he pretended to be his father's apprentice, one Baltazar Pękosławski, and would leave his father's flat to hide in the junction manhole for a few hours and at night would return, unseen, to his father's place, Warsaw, 1943. Family archive

SAMUEL IN THE WARSAW UPRISING (1944)

*'Samuel Willenberg.
I am a Jew [...]. There was
a moment of consternation,
they took it very nicely and
I became an [insurgent]*

Samuel Willenberg joined the uprising right at the start [1st of August 1944]. He took part in the rescuing of the Czech embassy and was a soldier in the "Ruczaj" battalion of the Home Army [AK] in district Śródmieście Południowe.

Unlike most Jews fighting in the Uprising, he did not want to hide his identity. Even though he was accepted in the battalion quite well, he still could see hostility from some comrades. Towards the end of August, during the exchange of fire on the barricade at Plac Zbawiciela, a shot was fired from behind his back, and the bullet flew over his head. After this event, in agreement with the command of the Home Army, he moved to the centre-left Polish People's Army [PAL].

[Before the Uprising] I would engage in, what you might call, saboteur activities. I walked around Warsaw with a friend, a girl, armed, and demanded

weapons from the Germans, disarming them. I joined the Uprising straightaway, joined a battalion which was engaged in the battle over the Czech embassy. We got to the Embassy, and then in the evening, in ulica Natolińska, the battalion commander, who was wounded, asked me if I formally belonged to any fighting group. 'No,' I said 'I'm a volunteer. Samuel Willenberg is my name, I'm Jewish'. After a moment of consternation, they admitted me to the battalion, they were very decent about it. I became a member of the Uprising. [of the 'Ruczaj' battalion]. Our position was in ulica Natolińska. Its even numbers side had been burnt by the Ukrainians, and we were defending the odd numbers side and therefore practically the access to the whole of Śródmieście [central Warsaw]. We had one barricade on ulica Mokotowska, another on ulica Marszałkowska near Plac Zbawiciela, and another on ulica Koszykowa, parallel to ulica Natolińska.

S. Willenberg "Igo", Oral History Archive podcast, Warsaw Uprising Museum, 01.08.2005

The inhabitants of the building believed that thanks to the painting their homes were under special protection [...]

[My father] During the Warsaw Uprising he stayed in an apartment building in ulica Marszałkowska no 60, but during the bombardments he would never go to the basements until one day a so called "Krowa" (Cow), a huge self-propelled bomb hit the house. He went to the basement then and painted the face of Christ on the ceiling. Never again was that building hit, it wasn't burnt during the Uprising either and was not demolished after the war to make way for the MDM [a new residential development]!

The inhabitants of the building believed that thanks to the painting their homes were under special protection and that's why they survived.

Michał Góral's interview with Ada and Samuel Willenberg, conducted in 2013–2015, unpublished

Photos:

- 9.1 Samuel Willenberg, photo taken most likely during the Warsaw Uprising, 1944. Family archive
- 9.2 Samuel Willenberg's false ID in the name of Ignacy Popow (made by the Polish People's Army, 1944). Family archive
- 9.3 Painting of Christ by Perec Willenberg on the basement ceiling in the apartment building in ulica Marszałkowska 60, Warsaw, 4 September 1944. Photo: Good Grounds Foundation, copy at the Warsaw Uprising Museum

AFTER THE WAR

For me, the war ended on the 19th of January 1945, under the bridge over the Utrata river. There I met Russian soldiers [...] I knew that my parents were living in Głowno and I managed to reach them. [...] We went to Łódź together [...]. In April 1945 I received a letter asking me to report to the mobilisation office. I got rather scared, as I thought they might force me into the army, and I wouldn't be able to look after my parents.

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 261, 262, 263.

Samuel Willenberg, his friend 2nd lieutenant Róg – Mazurek and other PAL officers were incorporated into the Polish Army and sent to the Military Academy in Rembertów.

[...] We weren't serious about these studies and would abscond from the lectures quite often. We would not have minded if they had decided to throw us out, but it turned out that we were still needed. [...] I was made chief of School of Junior Airmen (...) and after a few months chief of the battalion in charge of airfield management in Glinnik, near Tomaszów Mazowiecki.

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 264, 266.

At that time Samuel started working with a Zionist organization called 'Ichud', of which he used to be a member before the war, in Częstochowa. With its chiefs he was wondering how to get him discharged from the army.

[...] on my file he wrote in red ink 'Jewish nationalist'

I wrote that I, Samuel Willenberg, a Jew, the only son of Perec Willenberg, wishes to join his parents on their journey to Palestine (...). The personnel boss read my petition and then wrote on my file "Jewish nationalist" in red ink.

I was very pleased that I managed to get out of the army.

S. Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 267, 268.

After his discharge from the army Samuel undertakes various tasks on behalf of 'Ichud'; runs self-defence courses, smuggles Jewish youths on their way to Palestine through Vienna, Salzburg and further through the 'green border' in the Alps to Italy, also is involved in search for Jewish children saved from the Holocaust.

Photos:

- 10.1 Samuel Willenberg as a soldier in the Polish Army and his father Perec, Łódź, 1945. Family archive
- 10.2 Samuel Willenberg (second right), Officers' Training Academy, Rembertów, post-1945. Family archive
- 10.3 Samuel Willenberg (third left) with fellow Polish Army soldiers at Hitler's Wolf's Lair. Family archive
- 10.4 The Ten Commandments tablets in the Little Synagogue in Piotrków Trybunalski – the only surviving polychrome by Perec Willenberg. Photo: Good Grounds Foundation
- 10.5 Samuel Willenberg (centre) and visiting Jewish students at the grave of Theodor Herzl, Zionist leader, Vienna, December 1946. Family archive
- 10.6 Samuel Willenberg (third right) with a group of Jewish youth crossing the Italian border illegally in the Alps (with the intention of emigrating from Italy to Palestine), Winter 1946. Family archive
- 10.7 While in Italy, Samuel learns from the Zionist newspaper *Opinion* of the death of his father on 17 February 1947 – he hurries back to Poland. Family archive
- 10.8 Samuel and his mother, Maniefa Willenberg, Warsaw, 1943. Family archive

HUSBAND, FATHER, GRANDFATHER

While living in Łódź after the war, Samuel met Ada-Krystyna Lubelczyk. Krysia had survived the years of German occupation in Warsaw, hiding in the 'Aryan' part of the city. In December 1948 they got married. In 1950 the couple, together with Samuel's mother, left Poland for Israel. In order to leave they had to renounce Polish citizenship. In Israel Samuel Willenberg worked for forty years in the Ministry of Development as a main land surveyor. In 1960 the Willenbergs' daughter, Orit, was born.

Orit. It means 'full of light' in Hebrew.

Ada-Krystyna: "We wanted to include the names of our dead loved ones in her name. That was quite a challenge. Samuel's elder sister was called Tamara, younger one Ita, my mother was called Rachel, so we had 'rit', to which we added 'o' and created Orit. It means 'full of light' in Hebrew. She was truly a ray of light that entered our lives, Samuel's mother in particular [...]"

Ada-Krystyna: "She looked after Orit for twelve years, as we were busy working. She took Orit out in her pram; children would come up to them and say, 'what a beautiful baby, what beautiful eyes!' Quite incredible, really, how beautiful she was."

*Samuel Willenberg: "Exceptionally beautiful.
She brought us such happiness!"*

Michał Góral's interview with Ada and Samuel Willenberg,
conducted in 2013–2015, unpublished

Photos:

- 11.1 Samuel Willenberg and his fiancée Ada-Krystyna Lubelczyk, Łódź, 1947. Family archive
- 11.2 Samuel Willenberg with their daughter Orit, Israel, 1961. Family archive
- 11.3 Invitation to the wedding of Ada-Krystyna Lubelczyk and Samuel Willenberg, in Polish and Yiddish, Łódź, 1948. Family archive
- 11.4 Maniefa, Orit and Ada-Krystyna, Israel, 1960. Family archive, photo used in the film *Treblinka's Last Witness*, dir. Alan Tomlinson, 2014
- 11.5 Wedding photograph of Samuel and Ada-Krystyna Willenberg, Łódź, 1948. Family archive
- 11.6 Ada-Krystyna and Samuel Willenberg soon after their arrival in Israel, Negev, 1950s. Family archive
- 11.7 The Willenbergs and their daughter Orit Willenberg-Giladi, an Israeli architect (her projects include the Israeli Embassy building in Berlin and the conceptual designs of the Education part of the Treblinka Museum), at the unveiling of the monument designed by Samuel Willenberg, Częstochowa, 20 October 2009. Photo: Władysław Jurkow
- 11.8 Samuel and Ada-Krystyna Willenberg with their grandchildren (from left to Gal, Lee, Samuel, Ada and Ben) during a visit to the Israeli Embassy in Berlin, designed by Orit. Berlin, 2013. Family archive
- 11.9 The Willenbergs with their daughter and grandchildren, Herzliya, Israel, 2004. Family archive

HISTORY'S WITNESS

In the 80's, when it became easier to travel to Poland, Samuel Willenberg started coming regularly and talking about his experiences. He made over thirty trips to Poland altogether and met Polish and Israeli groups of young people. In 1994 his Polish citizenship was returned to him.

*Together with my wife
we worked on the best
ways to explain things [...],
to make both nations
understand each other.*

*I talk about those who denounced and robbed Jews,
and about those who saved my wife, and about those
who saved me and helped me after my escape from
Treblinka in the full knowledge of who I was.
Together with my wife we worked on the best ways
to explain things [...].
The most important thing is to make both nations
understand each other [...].*

P. Śpiewak, *Instead of end, Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 314.

Since the beginning of the 21st century numerous documentaries about Samuel Willenberg have been made, for instance:

OSTATNI ŚWIADEK (The Last Witness)
dir. M. Nekanda Trepka, 2003.

JUST TWO OF US (Tylko nas dwóch)
dir. Tzipi Baider, 2011.

SAMUEL
dir. Jan Kidawa-Błoński, 2014.

TREBLINKA LAST WITNESS (Ostatni świadek Treblinki)
dir. Alan Tomlinson, 2014

Photos:

- 12.1 Zygmunt Rolat (Sigmund A. Rolat, a founding donor of Polin, the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews in Warsaw), Szewach Weiss (former Israeli Ambassador to Poland) and Samuel and Ada Willenberg at the 70th Anniversary of the Revolt in Treblinka, Treblinka Museum, 2 August 2013. Photo: Adrian Gryczuk, Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0 PL]
- 12.2 Samuel Willenberg's book, *Revolt in Treblinka*, written in Polish, has been translated into Hebrew, English, French, German, Czech, Dutch, Japanese and Russian. Photo Anna Styczyńska
- 12.3 70th Anniversary of the Revolt in Treblinka – using his own sketches, Samuel Willenberg explains how the extermination camp worked, Treblinka Museum, 2 August 2013. Photo: Adrian Gryczuk, Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0 PL]
- 12.4 Samuel Willenberg meets students from the Art High School in Częstochowa at the Warsaw Uprising Museum, 2010. Photo: Michał Góral
- 12.5 Samuel Willenberg holds the Torah scroll, saved from the Holocaust, at a meeting with students of the Yeshiva Bnei Akiva Modi'in; also present are Ada-Krystyna Willenberg and Rabbi Szalom Malol, Israel, 22 December 2015. Wikimedia Commons
- 12.6 Samuel and Ada-Krystyna Willenberg with their daughter Orit Willenberg-Giladi in front of the monument dedicated to the memory of Częstochowa ghetto, designed by Samuel Willenberg, 20 October 2009. Photo: Grzegorz Skowronek, Agencja Wyborcza.pl

SCULPTOR

Aged seventy, Samuel Willenberg retired from his job and enrolled at the University of Third Age to study art. He started with painting, followed by sculpture. He made a series of sculptures depicting people and situations still alive in his memory. This series was exhibited first in 2003 in the Zachęta art gallery in Warsaw at the 60th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and subsequently in Israel, Germany and the USA. Since 2020 this exhibition has been shown around Poland, as part of a travelling exhibition organised by IPN [Institute of National Memory].

When I'm sculpting, I go back in time [...] Images come back to me then.

[When I started to sculpt] [...] I wanted to show the past events as vividly as I was able to. I didn't want to add anything superfluous, didn't want to fantasise. These works are in a sense an illustration to my book, naturally. I have written what is still alive for me and I have sculpted the same [...].

I have a good visual memory [...] When I'm sculpting, I go back in time and see all kinds of details of my past experiences. Images come back to me then. I can see that 'szajsmajster' by the latrines again, I can see the barbed wire fence with some green branches entangled in it. I can see the latrine, I can see the wooden ramp, where the old, the infirm and the children were sat and then shot. In a dug-out fire

was burning and there the dead bodies were thrown in. I remember lots of other things, but they cannot be depicted in art, as they are too macabre [...].

I found my true calling when I started sculpting people remembered from Treblinka.

P. Śpiewak, *Instead of end, Revolt in Treblinka*, Jewish Historical Institute, 2016, p. 309.

In 2005 Samuel Willenberg created his last sculpture, when he had learnt of the death of Pope John Paul II. The sculpture depicts the Pope over the scrolls of the Torah and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. It is especially touching when we remember that the author after Treblinka experience was saying emotionally: God wasn't there!

S.W.: I made this just after His death, quite spontaneously. He was the best Pope ever... No Pope before Him talked with the Jews or entered a synagogue!

A-K.W.: And spoke of them as 'our elder brothers'!

S.W.: I had a lot of respect for John Paul II. I wanted to show him in the context of both our religions. The Bible is both Christian and Jewish. The ten commandments are the same for us all. It is a very realistic sculpture. With a cross, and thirty-three buttons on his dress, just as in life. No fantasy. But the Tablets have no words on them, as everybody knows them. And the Torah, as an obvious symbol. It was not an easy, everyday thing for me, to sculpt the Pope. It was a spiritual act.

M. Górski, M. Środoń, interview with Ada and Samuel Willenberg, Warsaw, 26.10.2010, unpublished
Ada Krystyna Willenberg, phone conversation with Małgorzata Łukasiewicz-Traczyńska, July 2022, unpublished

Photos:

- 13.1 Samuel Willenberg and his sculpture *Father Helping His Child to Remove Shoelaces*. Photo: Agnieszka Traczyńska, Good Ground Foundation
- 13.2 The monument designed by Samuel Willenberg and funded by Zygmunt Rolat, dedicated to the memory of the forty thousand of Częstochowa Jews murdered in Treblinka; located at the spot where the Jews from the ghetto were forced to board the train – a fragment of a railway track on the monument refers symbolically to that, 20 October 2009. Photo: Władysław Jurkow
- 13.3 Samuel Willenberg supervises the construction of the monument, Częstochowa, before 2009. Family archive
- 13.7 Samuel Willenberg working on the sculpture of Pope John Paul II, Tel Aviv, 2005 Family archive
- 13.6 The sculpture of Pope John Paul II, Tel Aviv, 2008. Family archive
- 13.4 Membership card issued to Samuel Willenberg by the Polish Association of Sculptors, 2004. Family archive
- 13.5 Pope John Paul II in prayer before the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, Israel. March 26, 2000. Photo: Grzegorz Gałązka

14

HERO OF TWO NATIONS

Samuel Willenberg received many medals, such as:

The War Order of Virtuti Militari [awarded in 1944];

The Warsaw Uprising Cross [awarded in 1993
by Poland's President Lech Wałęsa];

The Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland [awarded
in 2008 by Poland's President Lech Kaczyński];

An Order Polonia Restituta [awarded in 2013
by Poland's President Bronisław Komorowski].

Also, in 2014, Samuel Willenberg gave a testimonial
about Treblinka in the Knesset – Israel's parliament.

A cast of Samuel's Willenberg sculpture *Powstaniec
z Treblinka* [Insurgent from Treblinka] is displayed at
the Israeli President's residence.

Samuel Willenberg died on the 19th of February
2016 in Tel Aviv. At Samuel's funeral in 2016 Israel's
President Reuven Rivlin gave a speech, and the Polish
President, Mr Andrzej Duda, sent official condolences.

*[...] We have lost
the hero of both our nations,
Polish and Jewish*

Samuel Willenberg personifies a symbol of the struggle for human dignity. His life was an example of saying 'No' to evil. [...] We have lost the hero of both our nations, Polish and Jewish. He fought for our country's freedom.

Andrzej Duda, President of Poland, 22nd February 2016

Samuel, [...] You are a hero

When we met in Poland, Samuel said to me: "I'm not a hero". Well, Samuel, today I've to you to tell you: "You are a hero".

Reuven Rivlin, President of Israel, 22nd February 2016

Photos:

- 14.1 Samuel Willenberg's medals. Photo: Good Grounds Foundation
- 14.2 Samuel Willenberg receives the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, Jerusalem, 15 May 2008. Presidential Office archive
- 14.3 The Willenberg family with Mr Lech Kaczyński, President of Poland, Mrs Maria Kaczyńska and the Rev. Roman Indrzejczyk, after the presentation to Samuel Willenberg of the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, Jerusalem, 15 May 2008. Presidential Office archive
- 14.4 Samuel Willenberg at the Belvedere Presidential Palace with President of Poland Mr Bronisław Komorowski (also present: Mr Jan Kidawa-Błoński, director of the film Samuel, Mrs Ada-Krystyna Willenberg and Mr Zygmunt Rolat), Warsaw, 23 April 2014. Presidential Office archive
- 14.5 Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, Ada and Orit Willenberg, the widow and daughter of Samuel Willenberg, the last survivor of a prisoners' revolt at the Treblinka Nazi death camp in Poland, who died aged 93, mourn during his funeral in the central Israeli moshav of Udim on February 22, 2016. Photo by JACK GUEZ / AFP

EXHIBITION CREATORS

CURATOR

Mateusz Środon

EXHIBITION SCREENPLAY (SCENARIO)

Mateusz Środon

ARRANGEMENT AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

Kuba Maria Mazurkiewicz

PROJECT COORDINATION AND PRODUCTION

Małgorzata Łukasiewicz-Traczyńska

CONTENT REVISION

Krystyna Ada Willenberg

Marek Górski

THE FILM "TREBLINKA IS IN ME"

Krzysztof Żurowski

Jerzy Traczyński

SEARCH QUERY, PHOTO CAPTIONS

Anna Styczyńska

SUBSTANTIVE CARE

Dr Monika Polit

Mordechai Anielewicz Centre for Research and Teaching of the History and Culture of Jews in Poland, Faculty of History, University of Warsaw.

IT COORDINATION

SAMUELWILLENBERG.ORG WEBSITE

Jerzy Traczyński

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Elżbieta McIver

ENGLISH TRANSLATION ASSISTANT

Janina Wędrychowska

EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Ewa Biernacka

PRODUCTION AND ASSEMBLY

Pracownia Tryktrak, www.pracownia-tryktrak.pl

ORGANISATION AND PATRONAGE

Good Grounds Foundation

ul. Wita Stwosza 59A

02-661 Warszawa

tel. 508 872 775

fundacja@dobrygrunt.org



**Fundacja
Dobry Grunt**

PATRONAGE



PARTNER

Mordechai Anielewicz Centre for the Study and Teaching of the History and Culture of Jews in Poland, Faculty of History, University of Warsaw.



Wydział Historii
Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego



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im. ANIELEWICZA**
Wydział Historii UW

<https://www.samuelwillenberg.org/en>