provide a diploma that enabled a Jewish student to attend university, and even those with such a diploma would not enter Poznań University, which strictly imposed a *numerus nullus* rule,[15] whereby not a single Jew was accepted for study.

While we generally think of the university world as a place of freedom and struggles for human rights, Polish universities, beginning in the 1920s, were arenas of repression. Prominent positions in their student organizations and faculty were held by extreme-right, fascist and anti-Semitic groups. Reaction to the anti-Semitic wave inside the Jewish community was multifaceted.[16] The limitation of Jewish presence in the universities was a cause of important political struggles at the Ministry of Higher Education, in Parliament, at the universities and inside various political groups.[17] Racist rules were progressively implemented throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s, with the situation becoming extremely tense after the death in 1935 of Piłsudski, the popular Polish leader who was strongly opposed to Dmowski's Endecja. Piłsudski's death cleared the way for the domination of Endecja and its affiliated Związek Akademicki Młodzież Wszechpolska (All-Polish Youth), which transformed Polish higher learning into a largely anti-Semitic environment. At this time, collaborations with German universities were strong, and Polish universities often hosted 'personalities', such as Hans Frank or Joseph Goebbels (both gave speeches at Warsaw University). The manifestations of fascism and anti-Semitism were both institutional and personal, with the hostility extending to other minorities such as Ukrainians (Hnatiuk, 2016). Allegiance to the anti-Semitic cause, among students, was signified by the wearing of a green ribbon (an action organized by the Green Ribbon League: Liga Zielonej Wstążki), which showed that the wearer was not a Jew and enforced the 'ghetto bench' – separate spaces for Jew and non-Jews, with Jews forced to stand while Christian students were sitting).[18]

The university administration, meanwhile, put a special stamp on the identity papers of Jews, and fraternities were ethnically exclusive (Aleksiun, 2014: 126). University rectors imposed the segregationist laws, and most professors were not opposed to their implementation. However, especially in the late 1930s, there were some examples of individual and collective acts of resistance to these racist regulations by non-Jewish students and faculty. Protest letters against the ghetto bench were signed by some faculty members (Markiewicz, 2004: 109–10),[19] while other professors,[20] and the rector of Lviv University, Stanisław Kulczyński, refused to sit while Jewish students were standing, or refused to begin their classes while the racist rules were imposed. Some non-Jewish students tried to protect their Jewish colleagues and 'pro-Jewish' professors,[21] both of whom – along with the students they sought to protect – were frequently the targets of beatings and other pressures from the majority of

students. Riots broke out at several universities, forcing rectors to close these institutions in order to restore peace (Aleksiun, 2014). The price of maintaining the peace, however, was generally the enforcement of racist regulations. *Numerus clausus* limited access of Jews to the most popular faculties, with enrolment expected to reflect their proportion in the general population. Medical studies were particularly difficult to follow, even for those lucky enough to be enrolled, because of a rule requiring 'ethnical-religious' separation in anatomy–physiology courses (Jews weren't allowed to dissect 'Christian' bodies) (Maramorosch, 2015). Not surprisingly, the huge majority of Polish Jews studied abroad. France, Switzerland, Belgium and even Austria were major destinations before Nazi occupation.

In Poznań, after several student protests (November 1931, March 1933), *numerus nullus* was imposed and the university space was 'cleansed' of Jews. These events and troublesome times at the university strongly influenced the whole educational sector. The gymnasia, or high schools, also implemented pro-Aryan rules. Bauman recalled the climate of anti-Semitism fifty years later, in the following way:

> In the years immediately preceding the war, anti-Semitism grew more venomous and pervasive. . . . We read of mounting physical violence, of the beatings of Jewish students in the universities, of mini-pogroms in a rising number of rural areas and small provincial towns, of self-styled fascist troopers marching through the Jewish shtetls, watched over rather apathetically by police not particularly eager to be involved. (Bauman, 1986/7: 13–14)

This was the situation at the moment when Teofila Bauman emigrated. She had no dowry, as Zygmunt's parents' financial situation did not allow them to spare any money. According to accounts by her relatives, Teofila had no interest in further pursuing an education. Following the tradition of the time (all Zofia's sisters had been married off through arrangements), Zofia started to look for a husband,[22] and initially found a wealthy widower with two children who were older than Tosia. He was an old German Jew, fluent in German and Yiddish but speaking Polish poorly, who owned land in southern Poland. Tosia found the arrangement distasteful, and her mother agreed. The search for a husband resumed, this time with a happy ending – true love.

In the summer of 1938, the National Exposition took place in Poznań, and the Baumans rented their flat near the fairgrounds (today the location of the Poznań International Fair) to a young man who came from Palestine for business. Tosia and her future husband immediately fell in love, and she departed almost immediately to marry him in Palestine, returning with husband and baby

girl (and pregnant with another child) in August 1939. Thanks to their British passports, Tosia and her family were able to flee Poland when the war began some weeks later.

Bauman recounts the story in his private manuscript; a slightly different version appears in some of his official postwar documents. In the CV Bauman provided in 1949 as part of his application to join the Communist Party, he states:

> my parents made her [Tosia] leave Poland for Palestine, making use of the chance visit by a Palestinian citizen, Barzilay Yedidya – Mizrachi.[23] She married him and today she is still in Palestine, where she works in the laboratory of the Givat Brenner fruit cannery. She divorced her first husband and is the wife of a tractor driver, Gabrieli. She became a Zionist-chauvinist, in the process stirring up nostalgic feelings about a Jewish state in my father.[24]

A year later, in an Army questionnaire, Bauman added: 'she was Zionist and probably joined the Mapai' (a socialist and peace-oriented group that was popular among Polish-Jewish emigrants in the late 1930s) (Zygmunt Bauman – Ankieta specjalna, 1950).[25]

Zygmunt, meanwhile, remained in Poznań to study for high school exams: 'The anxiety about the outcome of the entrance examinations came on the top of my sister's whirlwind romance, marriage, and abrupt departure. It was a long, hot, and consequential summer' (Bauman, 1986/7: 19).

Gymnasium on the ghetto bench

Public primary schools in Poland in the 1930s accepted minority children, but secondary schools, following the universities' example, applied selective rules. Prior to World War II, secondary schooling in Poland was intended to educate the middle classes for careers in the professions or business. The gymnasia were institutions for a select population. However, Jewish students in state gymnasia experienced many aspects of *numerus clausus*, as well as social ostracism and anti-Semitism expressed openly by teachers and classmates (Aleksiun, 2014: 111, note 3).

In Poznań, only two schools (in his manuscript, Zygmunt Bauman speaks of knowing only one) were open to Jewish pupils. Candidates had to pass very rigorous exams to get into them.

> My parents could hardly afford the high fees of a gymnasium . . . but there was not a moment of doubt that they would make any sacrifice to see me through. So the true problem was to get admitted. . . . The Berger State Gymnasium was the only secondary school which settled

> for numerus clausus – confining the number of Jewish pupils so that it would not exceed the percentage of Jews in the total population of the area. In Poznan conditions, this meant less than one percent. I graduated from my primary school with excellent marks, but the chances of admission were still very slim indeed. . . . First came written exams in Polish literature and in mathematics. The candidates reaching the top marks in both were to be admitted; the rest had to stand competitive oral examinations. I attended both written examinations. A week later my turn at the orals had arrived. (Bauman, 1986/7: 19–20)

Due to the enormous stress, Bauman responded poorly to the teacher who conducted his interrogation, and was almost rejected, when suddenly the director of the gymnasium announced that both written exams were excellent and Zygmunt had already been admitted. The emotions caused by this situation remained alive even fifty years later: 'The director's words, the examiner's suddenly sour and disappointed face, the deafening pounding of my heart, the tears of my mother who waited, half alive, outside – all melted into the experience of an excruciating happiness; the happiest memory of my childhood years. My first achievement – by my efforts alone, and against overwhelming, indomitable odds' (Bauman 1986/7: 19–20).

So Zygmunt Bauman passed through the 'eye of the needle' and became one of the rare Jewish students enrolled in a state gymnasium in Poznań. According to the Berger Gymnasium's school archives,[26] five of the forty-nine students in the 1938–9 class were Jewish, or 10 per cent, the average proportion of 'Jews to Poles' in the country (to use terminology from the interwar period). Three of the five Jewish students flunked their final exams in the first class and had to repeat the year, leaving only Zygmunt and one other Jewish student in his class at the Berger Gymnasium.

In the 1930s, Berger was considered the best secondary school for boys in Poznań and the whole Wielkopolska region. According to its originating document, written by founder Gotthilf Berger, the school was supposed to accept students without regard to their ethnicity and religion. We can imagine how happy Zygmunt's parents were that their son was part of this elite institution. He was happy, too, but quickly learned that acceptance into the school hadn't altered his place in the student body.

> A few weeks later the great day came. Proudly donning my Berger Gymnasium's cap, this visible and indisputable pass to the ranks of the gloried Polish intelligentsia, I arrived at the door of the first form. I had no time to cross it before I was submerged in an avalanche of kicks and punches. Pushed and pulled from all sides, I lost control over my legs and found myself moving – moved, rather – toward the distant left rear corner of the room. Someone's arms thrust me finally

> on the last bench. 'Here is your place, Jew! And don't you dare look elsewhere.'
>
> It took a few minutes to come round – all the more so, as the din in the classroom continued unabated. Only when I recovered my senses did I notice that I was not to be alone in the ghetto to which I had been assigned. . . . Four pairs of eyes filled with tears of shame, trying not to look in the other eyes, who witnessed their humiliation. . . . I belonged now to a group, to a category, which could be classified and branded and summarily treated. (Bauman, 1986/7: 20–1)

Bauman was no longer alone in his situation; now he was joined by other young dreamers. The first day's reception, and what followed, was meant to cut them down to size, to subdue and shame them:

> As far as I am aware, not one of our teachers objected to our forceful confinement to a ghetto. Some took care to manifest their approval by selecting the residents of the ghetto for special treatment. . . . The teacher of geography made it publicly known that knowledge possessed by the Jews must have been obtained in a not entirely honest way and thus took care to mark it lower than similar knowledge revealed by non-Jewish pupils. . . . Some other teachers, however, studiously disavowed the invisible ghetto walls. One or two – the teacher of history in particular – seemed to be ashamed to teach in a classroom so divided. The gradation of teachers' attitudes was roughly replicated among the pupils. No one however, either among the teachers or among our non-Jewish classmates, tried to defy the 'facts of life'. The division was solid and permanent, as those who wished it to remain so acted, while those who did not like it – watched. (Bauman 1986/7: 24–5)

The solid and permanent division was reflected in the grading in this select institution, in which being promoted to the next year was a challenge. Eight of the forty-nine students in Bauman's class did not finish the first year (one because of bad health, another for financial reasons), and five dropped out the following year. The average grade, on a scale of 1 to 5, was 3 – only six students received a 4, or 'good' grade, and only one obtained a 5. Zygmunt Bauman's score was the second-highest in his class. And yet, he believed, his teachers discriminated against him. One explained to Zygmunt that he would have liked to give him the best grade, since he deserved it, but 'you understand very well that with your origin it is impossible. You cannot be the best in the class. This place is reserved for a Polish kid.'[27]

Grade by grade and subject by subject, comparing Bauman's results with those of his top competitor bears out this statement.

The first in the class, Kazimierz Skrzypczak, obtained an average grade of 4.4, while Zygmunt received a 4.0. Skrzypczak led the class at the end of the year in all subjects except gym, drawing and manual work. Bauman was unable to get the best grade in religion (which focused on Catholicism), and in geography and drawing he received a 4.0. It is clear that his geography teacher believed that Jewish students did not acquire their knowledge in a 'totally honest way' – he evaluated Zygmunt's progress suspiciously, although Zygmunt's grade in 'behavior' belied such an accusation: he received the maximum grade of 5. He received perfect marks also in Polish language and history, and in Latin, biology and mathematics. At age 14, Bauman started to study English, and got the best grade during two semesters in the language that would become his third fluent tongue several years later. In manual works and gymnastics, he received a 3 – confirming his status as a nerdy child. Everyone seemed to know quite well that, however well you did your work, if you were a Jew you would never be first in the class.

This was a 'natural fact of life' (as Bauman cynically described this permanent discrimination), part of the negative picture of the Jewish community transmitted by Polish schools. As the historian Kamil Kijak wrote, 'In the textbooks for the youngest public school pupils, national minorities did not appear at all. In the textbooks for the older classes, the Jews were presented in an unequivocally negative way . . . The Jew was unequivocally a stranger. These texts did not include Jews as ordinary citizens or full members of a common fatherland' (Kijak, 2010: 176).

In secondary school, Bauman's situation simultaneously improved and worsened. It worsened because the environment inside the school was much more aggressive. It improved because a few other teenagers shared his identity – a small group of 'others' with whom to share stigmatization, isolation and discriminatory treatment. Bauman recalled fifty years later: 'Being now a member of [a] group, of a category, sharing my predicament with others in a "preordained" way that neither they nor I could challenge, changed my life in a most radical fashion. Suddenly, I stopped being a solitary case, a person left to my own devices and able to rely on none but myself' (Bauman, 1986/7: 25).

At 13 years old, after passing with excellence a very competitive entrance exam to the elite school, Zygmunt needed to learn how to feel less human. Both the victims and aggressors learned from this destructive process, which prepared victims to receive the attacks, and taught the youths belonging to the dominant group that the people in the ghetto bench were less than human. It was a widespread practice – 'obvious', 'natural'. Racism followed the Jews at each step of their lives – from birth, through school, university, companies and institutions, in professional life – everywhere. Thus,

it is not surprising that, during the years of German occupation, Jews suffered from the hostility or simple indifference of their neighbours. The process of transforming them into less-than-humans had started years before World War II and contributed to the Holocaust. Institutional racism spread daily, step by step[28] – bringing ever-tightening new restrictions.

This all-pervading and deadly illness did not poison only Polish society – several countries in Europe were under the charm of fascist and nationalist ideologies. Each of them – Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, Rumania, Hungary – dreamed of a great Homeland composed of a 'pure' race of a single ethnicity. This was the silly dream that resulted in World War II. In Poznań, acts of protest against this inhuman treatment were rare and weak. And in the autumn of 1938, especially after Kristallnacht,[29] the treatment grew worse. As thousands of German Jews fled the country, the German government expelled several thousand Polish Jews across the German–Polish border, where most of them stayed in prison-like refugee camps in Zbąszynek. For several months, beginning in October 1938, the Polish government put up obstacles against receiving this population, arguing that they were not genuine Polish citizens because of their Jewishness.[30] The anti-Semitic press regurgitated the anti-Semitic climate in Polish towns and cities: there was a steady flow of stories about the camps at Zbąszynek, which were described as the start of a fearful, massive wave of Polish-German-Jewish refugees, in the context of high unemployment and tax increases. In Poznań, the closest Polish city to Zbąszynek, the ambience was particularly unfriendly for non-Catholic Poles. The atmosphere at the Berger Gymnasium reflected the environment around it – anti-Semitic, racist treatments were 'obvious'; a great majority of the people (both persecutors and persecuted) saw them as normal.

This was a hard life lesson that Zygmunt Bauman learned early – one's fellow students and teachers could be racist and discriminatory. Włodzimierz Szer, enrolled in a secular Jewish school in Warsaw, and Marian Turski, enrolled in religious school in Łódź, were spared this feeling early in their lives, as were many young Polish Jews. Zygmunt Bauman, however, felt his minority origins practically from birth. However, in the final months of his life in Poznań, he had at least met his reference group and could share similar experiences with friends who also felt 'less human' at school – people with whom he could share dreams of a future without racial discrimination.

Belonging – a *szomer* in Hashomer Hatzair

> The Hashomer Hatzair (Hebrew: Young Guard) was one of the most influential Zionist organizations in the interwar period, although it did not aspire to become a mass movement. Its members, *szomer*, were obliged to work for the implementation of the Zionist program by promoting Jewish national funds, mastering the Hebrew language and finally making alija, followed by work on collective farms (kibbutzim) in Palestine. Hashomer Hatzair saw itself as raising the national vanguard of Jews by creating close friendships and a sense of brotherhood and family ties among its members. (Aleksiun, 2002: 33)

Bauman had no need to replace his family, but he was certainly seeking friendship and, like most teenagers – especially those who were outcasts in school – a peer group.[31] And so it was that Zygmunt enrolled in the Zionist youth organization that met in a large hall in an unused synagogue at the corner of Dominikańska and Szewska streets. It was a

> shoddy room in one of the buildings quietly living out their old age in the few streets left of the old Jewish quarter.[[32]] Inside that room, I found several boys and girls of more or less my age. Together, they constituted the Poznan branch of Hashomer Hatzair. The rest was a maelstrom. I was now in a group that accepted me for no reason other than its inability to get rid of me. The other boys and girls were not 'special cases' . . . I was not a special case anymore. We talked, we quarreled, we danced, we fought, we behaved in a way I thought was reserved only for normal people, of which I evidently was not one. Inside these flaking walls I was all I could not be outside. I ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of freedom, and it dawned upon me that life could be different than it was – not just on two afternoons every week.
>
> Suddenly, the world did not look unshakeable and preordained. Neither did the choice seem, as it had before, 'take it or leave it'. I felt I would not take it anymore. And I did not intend to leave it. (Bauman, 1986/7: 25)

The group gave Bauman power, restored dignity, agency and dreams. It filtered into his entire attitude towards the future, and the life around him. From now on, racist treatment would no longer be 'natural' – it would be something to change, to fix, to abolish. And the changes would be made by the members of a young and dynamic organization. This feeling was shared by other *szomers* who felt liberated by these meetings from the weight of tremendous discrimination. Being a part of a Jewish religious community was a different

experience. Bauman got his bar mitzvah,[33] but that was considered a basic ritual – nothing specific. Hashomer Hatzair was what shaped his feelings of belonging.

'We held meetings, delivered presentations and had a stream of visitors who came to lecture or speak with us from szomer friend groups from Włocławek, Warsaw or Kalisz', recalled another *szomer* from Bauman's group, the daughter of a successful Poznanian businessman:

> There were about a hundred people, all young people. We danced the hora, girls and boys, singing and holding each other's arms, circling and stomping. . . . And here we were told about the situation of Jews in Palestine! There were lectures about our history and culture. Kibbutz letters came from those who had already gone there . . . it awoke a pride in me to be a Jew! . . . Up until now I had some connections to Jews whom I liked, but I had more friends among Polish women. Among *szomers*, I began to identify myself as a Jew as such. I found myself among my peers and felt that I was one of them. I belonged somewhere. (Fira, in Niziołek and Kosakowska, 2016: 36)

'The world I wished to put in place of the existing one was conceived after the pattern of the Hashomer Hatzair branch', Bauman wrote:

> Looking back, I think it was the life we practiced, rather than the life we fantasized about, which sedimented in the lasting image of [a] just world, which from then on, and up to this day, I was to dream of, run after, mislead myself that I could find.
>
> This alluring world was given the name of Zion, yet I do not believe that the name referred to any particular geographically defined place. As far as I was concerned, Zion was located in Winiary woods, where for the first time in my life I had my own share of May Day delights in the secure company of my new friends. Zion was the curious world without bullies. A world in which people were liked or disliked for what they did rather than for what they were. In Zion people were equal unless they made themselves otherwise. There were no Jews and Gentiles, no rich and poor, no haves and have nots. Everyone had the right to be respected. (Bauman 1986/7: 25–6)

Hashomer Hatzair was a preparation for their future lives, a training ground for becoming active and creating a life instead of suffering through one, and it provided a lesson the *szomers* gained for ever, at least in Bauman's case. This was a turning point, a life, a durable transformation,[34] that gave Bauman a passion for changing the world to a better place, with a socialist orientation. The Hashomer Hatzair period also corresponded with a period of

physical change for Bauman: he became a rangy young man, and was to remain so the rest of his life. Happiness, however, was short-lived. In September 1939, the war began.

'From my brief, barely half-a-year long Hashomer Hatzair experience, I emerged determined to change the world. And a socialist. And slim. Indeed during these fateful six months I lost all my fat. Soon after, I lost my home – forever. And my homeland – for the first time' (Bauman, 1986/7: 26).