

## LEOPOLD INFELD: HOPE LOST, HOPE REGAINED\*

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This lecture was delivered by the author of the book “Konin: A Quest”, which describes the history of the Jewish community in the small town of Konin in central Poland. Unable at that time to find employment in any university in Poland, Leopold Infeld served there as headmaster of a Jewish co-educational high school between 1922 and 1924. Drawing on his own researches as well as Infeld’s memoir “Quest: The Evolution of a Scientist”, the author presents Infeld within the context of his family’s social and religious background, and his “exile” years as a teacher in Konin, evoking a little-known period in the scientist’s life.

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First may I explain how it is that I, a non-scientist who never knew or worked with, or studied under Leopold Infeld, come to be taking part in this symposium. My fascination with him sprang in the first instance not from his achievements as a scientist — although without them I would probably not have been aware of his existence — but from the fact that he spent two years of his life as a young man in a town called Konin situated about midway between Łódź and Poznań. At that time Konin was a small market town pleasantly positioned on the river Warta, distinguished for nothing in particular, much like hundreds of other such towns in rural Poland. Before Infeld went there, it is almost certain that he would not have heard of the place. Nor would I but for the fact that my mother and father came from Konin, where their families had lived for generations. They emigrated to England just before the First World War and married in London, where I was born. As a child I heard the name of this town repeated again and again whenever my parents talked to others about the world they had left behind and its people, almost all of whom in later years were to perish in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps.

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Now leap forward to the 1960s when a committee of Konin Jews in Israel decided to publish privately a book honouring the memory of the Jewish community which had lived there for 500 years until it was annihilated as part of the Final Solution [1]. I subscribed to the publication, and one day, in 1968, the heavy, blue-bound volume arrived. Alas, I could not read it because it was written almost entirely in Yiddish and Hebrew, but I was able to look at the many illustrations. On p.260, there was a head-and-shoulders photograph of a man, probably in his late fifties, with a forceful face, strong-jawed — one might say almost pugilistic. This was my first encounter with Leopold Infeld.

Move forward again, this time to 1987, when I embarked on a book of my own about this faraway place of which I knew virtually nothing except that it was an important part of my family's past. I borrowed money to cover my travel and research expenses, and devoted the next seven years to writing this book, a history of the Jewish community of Konin and its everyday life [2].

Although Infeld was not a Koniner, I devoted a lengthy chapter to him on account of his connection with the community, and because the more I found out about him, the more intrigued I became. In the course of my journeys in search of Konin's past, I met elderly men and women in Britain, Israel and America who had attended his school when he was their headmaster. In their old age they still remembered him warmly as a person and as a teacher. They recalled their pride as adults on hearing that their former headmaster was now working in America with the great Albert Einstein. As schoolchildren in Konin, they had not been aware of Infeld's consuming unhappiness, indeed despair, while he was in their midst.

Leopold Infeld's achievements as a scientist are well known to this gathering. The ground I wish to cover is perhaps less familiar — his family background, his early life, and especially the time he spent in Konin. He arrived there in 1922 at the age of 24. The town at that time had a total population of around 11,000, of whom roughly a quarter were Jews. They had invited him to Konin to be the new headmaster of the Jewish co-educational gymnasium. He had no experience as a schoolmaster, let alone as a headmaster. It was his first permanent job, and he held it for two years — years of disappointment and desperation, cut off from the social and intellectual life he had known and loved in Kraków. He never forgot this low period in his life. Years later, when he was in the United States working with Einstein, he wrote in his memoir, *Quest: The Evolution of a Scientist*: "There is still a name in my memory which has always remained a symbol of lost hopes: it is Konin" [3].

Why was it such a potent symbol of hopelessness? To answer this question we must go back to the early years of this century, and in particular to

Kraków's Jewish quarter, Kazimierz. Tourists there today bring away kitsch souvenirs in the form of carvings of rabbis wrapped in prayer shawls, tailors sitting cross-legged, peddlers selling their wares and other figures from the world of the great Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. This was the world that Leopold Infeld was born into, an insalubrious world of narrow streets and alleyways and overcrowded tenement buildings. Someone I know who grew up there in the 1930s has described it as "dark, dank, fetid".

Infeld's father, Salomon was a leather merchant, a member of the middle class in what was in the main an impoverished society. Occupying an upstairs apartment in one of the best streets of Kazimierz, ul. Krakowska, [4] the Infeld family thought themselves "superior to the inhabitants of the inner ghetto" [5]. Nevertheless, the young Ludwik — as Leopold was then known — slept each night on a sofa in a room which he shared with two sisters, an arrangement which continued until he was eighteen. During the day the family lived and ate their meals in the same room.

Infeld developed early on an intense dislike for his grandfather and the language which he spoke — Yiddish. This was the language the young boy heard all around him as he grew up in the Jewish quarter of Kraków. His father's business dealings were conducted in Yiddish and it was spoken at home. He was familiar too with the sound of biblical Hebrew. His father was a religious man who prayed in the synagogue each morning before breakfast. It was the norm then for Jewish boys to commence religious school — *cheder* — when they were five or even four years old. Learning was by rote. The teachers were strict disciplinarians adept at instilling God's word with the help of a whip or a stick. Ludwik was not the only Jewish child to rebel against his daily incarceration in a gloomy, airless room. It would have been particularly insufferable for a child such as he was, endowed with a high I.Q. and a questioning mind. He described the experience as being "plunged in a hopeless ocean of boredom" [6].

As he grew up, Infeld felt a growing desire to distance himself from the "misery of ghetto life, its poverty and lack of opportunity" [7]. For centuries that world had remained secure in its religious traditions and beliefs. But in the last quarter of the 19th century it increasingly felt the influence of secularism coming from the West. Zionism, socialism, communism and other isms were replacing religion with new certainties. The young were beginning to break away from the ways of their fathers, and wanted to escape from a world they found stifling, illiberal and without hope. Some dreamed of building a new Zionist society in the Holy Land. Others emigrated to America and western Europe. It is likely that Infeld, in his desire to escape, in his distaste for ghetto life, was blind to many of its virtues, failed to appreciate the richness and splendour of the Yiddish language and its literature.

Perhaps he also failed to realise that his own love of learning, desire for knowledge, urge to enquire, analyse, theorise and discover, owed something to his Jewish heritage, which placed a high value on such cerebral activities, albeit within a religious context. He wanted to break away from the world and the values of his parents, as the younger generation has often felt the urge to do.

One escape route was via a university education. This meant attending a school which prepared pupils for university entrance — in other words, a high-school, a gymnasium. Salomon Infeld rejected the idea. He wanted his son to follow him into the family business and sent him, against the boy's will, to a commercial school. Undeterred, Infeld obtained textbooks, mastered new subjects on his own, including Latin, and against all the odds passed the formidable oral and written *matura* exams with first-class honours. His father must have agreed, however reluctantly, to his enrolling at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. He graduated with honours, and a few years later, in 1921, he received his PhD at the same university. It was a solemn and elaborate ceremony, and I have often wondered if his parents were present on this occasion and how they felt. He does not say. We do learn from him that his was the first doctorate in theoretical physics to be awarded in independent Poland. Infeld's hopes were high. The escape door was open at last — the door to research, academic life, eventually a professorship. Eagerly he awaited offers of the university post he was sure would come his way.

None came and Infeld had not the slightest doubt why: he was certain it was because he was a Jew. "It was at the universities", he writes, "that anti-Semitic and reactionary slogans sank in most deeply" [8]. The careers of Jewish writers, poets and artists — working for themselves rather than as employees within institutions or in public service — were not hampered in this way. During the period between the two World Wars some of Poland's most gifted and admired literary figures were Jewish and, like Infeld, secular Jews who embraced Polish culture as their own and contributed hugely to it. The brilliant poets Julian Tuwim and Bolesław Leśmian are two examples. But it was more difficult for those who wished to advance within institutions such as the universities. The constitution of the new Poland guaranteed minority rights, but in reality discrimination was still practised even if not openly admitted as such. The historian Ezra Mendelsohn, who has written on the situation of the Jews in Poland between the wars, is one of the most fair-minded commentators on this thorny subject. He does not hold to the view that the history of the Jews in inter-war Poland was a tale of unmitigated woe. Indeed, he recognises that "we [the Jews] owe a debt to Polish freedom" which "allowed the Jews in the 1920s and 1930s to participate in politics, open schools, and write as they pleased" [9]. At the same

time, he points out that inter-war Poland “excluded them from first-class membership in the state” [10]. There *were* a few Jewish academics who rose to eminence between the wars — men such as Hugo Steinhaus, founder of a school of analytical mathematics, who taught at Lwów University, and Ludwik Krzywicki, the greatly respected sociologist of the University of Warsaw. The professor of Roman Law at Kraków University, Raphael Taubenschlag, was Jewish. Clearly, the situation varied from faculty to faculty. Jewish professionals were prominent in the fields of medicine and law, and when anti-Semitism in the universities expressed itself openly during the 1930s, leading to the so-called “ghetto benches” and brutal acts of violence, it came more from the students than from the academics, some of whom — members of the liberal intelligentsia — honourably supported their Jewish students.

But to return to Infeld, there was, as I have said, no doubt in his mind about the cause of his rejection. If he was right, what an irony that the man who wished to escape from his Jewish world, now found himself spurned by those unwilling to accept him into their world. Whether other factors might have played a part — such as rumours that he had Communist leanings — is a matter for speculation [11]. Also, it has to be said that Infeld himself admitted — with characteristic self-awareness — that perhaps he sometimes saw anti-Semitism where it did not exist. But whether or not anti-Semitism was the sole cause of his failure to find a university post, the fact remains that his hopes were shattered. Bleak reality banished what he called “the once glorious dream” [12].

Finding a teaching post in a Jewish school was not readily available to him either. As he wrote: “To the Polish world I was a Jew. To the Polish Jews I was not sufficiently Jewish” [13]. It is to the credit of the Konin community that he was Jewish enough for them. Theirs was a relatively progressive and enlightened community, generally free of religious fanaticism. Before the First World War it had been situated close to the German frontier and therefore more open to western influence than communities further to the east. But Infeld felt like someone who had been sentenced to exile for life. “While I was there”, he wrote, “my world was divided into two parts: isolated Konin in which, I thought, I should probably die, and the rest of the world which I should never see” [14]. The hate he had felt towards his ghetto surroundings in Kraków as a boy was now directed at Konin, where he walked through the alien streets, “cut off from everything he held dear” [15]. He hated the small-town provincialism. He hated the people with whom he felt nothing in common. His beloved sister Bronia joined him in Konin, where she worked as a teacher in a Jewish elementary school. But he was lonely. There were no cafés where he could gossip and laugh with soul mates, and flirt with the opposite sex, as he had done in Kraków. He lived in a muddy street close to the river. The sanitary arrangements had changed

little since the middle ages “Our outhouse was about 220 yards from the house. I still remember my visits there at night with a candle in my hand and despair in my heart” [16].

His pupils proved to be bright and receptive. It had been admirably ambitious if unrealistic of such a small community to establish its own gymnasium. The school had opened its doors in 1918 in cramped and inadequate accommodation. The teaching staff included other Ph.Ds, men and women who, like Infeld, were there through necessity rather than choice, who were underpaid and victims of the raging inflation of the early 1920s. The staff worked in a disgruntled, acrimonious atmosphere. Infeld found himself at odds with the school governors, who struggled to keep the school going on slender resources. Infeld hated having to make speeches to parent gatherings, begging for donations. In these conditions it is hardly surprising that teachers did not stay long. Infeld was the fourth headmaster in four years. He has described his feelings of utter dejection when, at the end of each day, he went back to his lodgings. “When I returned home”, he wrote, “I could not bear to look at my scientific books, collected during years of study. I did not believe that I would ever open one of them again in my life” [17].

When he finally left Konin in 1924, he must have felt like a man released from prison. He left to become a physics teacher in a Jewish gymnasium for girls. This was hardly the fulfilment of his hopes, but it did offer one consolation: it took him to Warsaw. In all, he spent almost eight years as a schoolteacher. One cannot help thinking that these years might have held back his development as a scientist. I hardly need to point out here, that mathematicians and physicists generally produce their best, most original work at an early age. Infeld himself was aware of this. He refers to these years as “The best years in the life of any scientist, the years in which imagination reaches its peak. Those years were gone” [18]. The whole of quantum physics was developed during what he calls his “provincial sleep” [19].

It was not until he was 31 that he stepped onto the first rung of the academic ladder, when he was appointed to a “senior assistantship” in theoretical physics at Poland’s second oldest university, Lwów. This was thanks to the support he received from Stanisław Loria, Jewish by birth, who was professor of experimental physics at the University. Infeld regarded the job as one suitable “for a graduate student or for a young man who had just taken a doctor’s degree” [20]. But at least he was set on his chosen path. He wrote: “Everything was changed, everything seemed beautiful and full of hope” [21]. (It is interesting to note how many times the word “hope” appears in his autobiographical writings). Infeld was subsequently promoted to docent — or reader.

Hope gained in one direction was, tragically, lost in another. Halina, the girl he had fallen in love with in 1928 and married, died four years later from a harrowing and protracted wasting disease. Eryk Infeld, writing about his father, has said: "There can be no doubt about her being the great love of his early life" [22]. Infeld goes on to refer to "how tragic the first half of my father's life was" [23]. A son Infeld had had by a previous marriage died in his early twenties. Later, Infeld's sisters, one of whom — Bronia — he greatly loved, perished in the Holocaust.

In 1933, crushed by grief after Halina's death, unable to work and desperate to get away from Lwów, Infeld gratefully accepted a Rockefeller Foundation Grant and went to Cambridge. He had a number of friendly and prosperous relatives living in England (who had Anglicised their surname to Infield), and he used to stay with them in London during Cambridge vacations. He incurred a certain degree of displeasure among some of his older relatives when he eloped with one of his English cousins and married her, a marriage which was not a success. Last year I traced two of Infeld's British kinsmen, who were small boys when Ludwik, as they still call him, stayed with them at their home in Hampstead. He joined the Infield family on seaside holidays, and Gerald Infield has recalled for me an image of his Polish cousin at that time. While he — Gerald — and his brother played on the beach, making sand castles, he was aware of Ludwik sitting in a deck chair nearby with an expression of intense concentration, covering sheet upon sheet of paper with mysterious marks and squiggles.

I doubt that Infeld, who relished every moment of his year at Cambridge, thought about Konin at this time; or when he returned to Lwów. But later, in America, when the Fascist cloud over Europe was growing darker, he received regular reminders of Konin in the mail, "letters from my old pupils, begging me to help them emigrate to this country... invariably sent by registered mail, full of pathos, sent by men and women who, for the price of a postage stamp, bought hope [that word again] for a few weeks, waiting for an answer which in most cases buried this hope" [24]. Infeld, who himself had known what it was to cherish hopes and to have them dashed, was able to feel for these desperate people in Konin, not knowing then that they were doomed to die in unspeakable ways.

Before he left Poland to take up his grant from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, achieved with Einstein's help, Infeld walked through Kraków for the last time and describes the experience in one of the most touching passages in *Quest*. Some of the hate he once felt for the Jewish environment into which he had been born was now tinged with sadness and sympathy:

I wandered through the ghetto of my town. On a summer morning the voices of Jewish boys singing in chorus the words of the Torah reached me through the open window of the school. There may be among them

someone who hates this place as I hated it and who dreams of going to a gymnasium. I went nearer. The school windows were open, the first-floor windows of a dreary house. I smelt the foul air of the room. It was the same air, the same smell of onions and potatoes, which I had smelled over thirty years before. I saw the tired, thin, badly nourished faces with burning dark eyes and for the first time in my life I was conscious of a touch of poetry in this sad ghetto scene [25].

He left for America in 1936, relieved to get away from the racial tensions in Poland and the "air saturated by hate which darkened the sun and shadowed all my days! Away from the endless talks of the Jewish problem, from whispers of the still darker future and of lost hope" [26]. Before he went to Princeton, he had said to a colleague that he could not bear the feeling of being unwanted. Many other Polish Jews shared that feeling. In Infeld's case, embracing assimilationism as he did, committed to Polish rather than Jewish culture, the sense of being discriminated against as a second-class citizen became a cause of intense bitterness. To quote Professor Mendelsohn again, this sense of being denied equal status "led by the late 1930s to a widespread feeling among Polish Jews, and especially among the youth, that they had no future in Poland, and that they were trapped" [27]. Infeld could see no future for himself in Polish academia. He had failed to be given the professorship he felt he deserved.

How different things were when, in 1950, he decided that he and his American wife Helen, whom he had married in 1939, and their two children would remain in Poland. Once unwanted in the land of his birth, he was now given a hero's welcome. In 1951 he began work on creating the Institute for Theoretical Physics in Warsaw. His life and scientific achievements during the years that followed I leave to others to deal with. Whatever his successes in North America, he had always missed Europe, and his native land. He was deeply attached to Polish poetry and literature. When he wrote *Quest* and had reason to fear he might never see Poland again, he expressed his longing for "the Polish fields and meadows, for the air smelling of flowers and hay, for vistas and sounds which can never be found elsewhere... I will never forget my country" [28].

One day in 1963 Infeld decided to visit Konin, the town he had once wanted to wipe from his memory. In 1922, he must have arrived there in a droshky along country lanes (there was no railway station in Konin at that time), dreading the life that lay ahead of him. Now, almost forty years later, he drove into the town in a limousine as an eminent guest of honour. Konin was fast developing as a new industrial city, but Infeld's memories were with the old Konin he had once known. He wrote about this visit in an essay published in a collection called *Sketches from the Past*, [29] and it was this essay which the Konin Memorial Book Committee in Israel decided to

include in their book, accompanied by the photograph I mentioned at the start. The book was published in 1968, the year of his death. I wonder how he would have felt at seeing his words translated into Yiddish, a language he had viewed with such distaste as a boy.

Writing about Konin as a man of 65, he portrayed the town in a softer, kindlier light than he had in *Quest*. He does not speak of primitive outhouses or streets without pavements. He informs the reader twice that Konin is “situated picturesquely on the bank of the River Warta” [30]. No mention of Konin as a symbol of lost hopes. Of the incessant in-fighting among his fellow teachers, not a word. He praises his pupils for the love with which they responded to their teachers. Even the school governors now appear in a human light. He recalls the day when, faced with yet another financial crisis at the school and at the end of his tether, he summoned a meeting of the governors to tender his resignation. Perhaps anticipating what he was planning to do, the governors unusually but astutely turned up that night armed with several bottles of vodka. The meeting ended with everyone, including Infeld, becoming uproariously drunk. One member of the board began dancing with a bottle on his head. Infeld joined in, was violently sick, and staggered home supported on the arms of two of the governors. He was still the headmaster of the Jewish gymnasium.

By 1963 the memory of those wasted years in Konin seems to have lost its sting. Moreover, he was burdened with a knowledge he did not possess when he wrote *Quest*. Then, he was writing about a community he wanted to forget. Now he was remembering a community that had been exterminated. The people from whom he once felt distanced had been systematically annihilated, his two sisters among them. I quote from my book:

...the change that must have struck Infeld most powerfully of all when he walked round the old streets he once knew was the absence of Jews. They had vanished. Of all the teachers at the school, only he had survived. The children he once taught were a lost generation. ‘I have tried to find out,’ he wrote, ‘what happened to my best pupils. What happened to Bułka, extremely intelligent; what happened to Lewin, the best in mathematics; what happened to Weinstein, the most promising poet? Always the same answer: murdered, murdered, murdered’ [31].

Infeld must have been aware of how kind destiny had been in taking him to Princeton and Toronto rather than Treblinka.

Infeld was an assimilated Jew. Whatever sense of Jewish identity he possessed had been foisted on him by the non-Jewish world. I can’t help feeling that the timing of his death was in one respect fortunate. He died just a few months before a wave of government-inspired anti-Semitism swept through Poland in 1968, with purges in the universities as well as political

life, driving most of the Jews in Poland who had survived the Holocaust out of the country. Might Infeld, who was no apparatchik and who had openly expressed views that were not always to the liking of the regime, might he too have fallen victim, finding himself again unwanted in his native land, his hopes dashed once more? As it is, he died without that experience, and if today he could observe the distinguished international assembly of scientists gathered here to celebrate the centenary of his birth, if he were to know how the Institute of Theoretical Physics in Warsaw has flourished, he would surely feel that his hopes had not been in vain.

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- [4] The house, No. 9, still stands today.
- [5] *Quest*, p.11.
- [6] *Quest*, p.33.
- [7] *Quest*, p.18.
- [8] *Quest*, p.184.
- [9] Ezra Mendelsohn, *Interwar Poland: good or bad for the Jews?* in *The Jews in Poland*, (Eds) Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk & Antony Polonsky, Oxford 1986, p.138.
- [10] Ezra Mendelsohn, *Interwar Poland: good or bad for the Jews?* in *The Jews in Poland*, (Eds) Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk & Antony Polonsky, Oxford 1986, p.139.
- [11] When Infeld applied for a docentship at Lwów University in 1930, some of those who opposed his appointment passed on rumours that he was a Communist. See *Quest*, pp.150-151.
- [12] *Quest*, p.99.
- [13] *Quest*, p.99.
- [14] *Quest*, p.300.
- [15] *Konin*, p.107.
- [16] Leopold Infeld, *Why I Left Canada: Reflections on Science and Politics*, translated by Helen Infeld, Montreal and London, 1978, p.133.
- [17] *Quest*, p.301.

- [18] *Quest*, p.102.
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