

Michal Friedman



This is me. The photo was taken in the 1930s. I don't remember when exactly it was taken. Could be that it was before I went to Grenoble or it could have been at the time I started to live in Warsaw. For my university studies, I came to Warsaw in 1933. I enrolled in the Polish Department. During my first year I lived on 2 Nowolipie Street, and afterwards on Długa Street. On Nowolipie Street there was a bankrupt store and some Jew got an idea how to make money out of it. He stood in front of the closed door of the store and shouted out to passers-by to have a look inside -a wonder of nature, a freak of nature, a bearded woman, everyone can check it out for only 20 groszy. And inside, in that dark, empty store, there was indeed a hairy woman standing. I

remember that I couldn't study on Długa Street because the landlady had rented me an alcove without a window or light. She used to turn the lights off at 10 already. So what did I do then? I went over to the other side of the street, to 13 Tłomackie! And there I came across individuals who became part of history. I met Izrael Sztern, an excellent poet, who generally didn't get the recognition he deserved, and many other wonderful people. Izrael Sztern was a devout man, and for that reason very skinny: he would fast, pray and fast again; he recited the psalms very frequently. He died of hunger during the occupation, for he wasn't made for this life. He had this God-given gift of poetry, in which he had few equals. Many years after the war, I translated Izrael Sztern's extended poem 'Ostrołęka', at the request of some young people from Ostrołęka, passionate fans of his poetry. Thus, Izrael Sztern got a place in the Polish language; he has been rescued for some future reader. At 13 Tłomackie I wasn't as bold as to strike up a conversation with everybody. When by chance I sat down next to Sztern and he encouraged me to talk, then - yes. At Tłomackie I used to see also Itzik Manger. I soaked up everything that happened there and relished the presence of great Jewish poets and writers. Something interesting was always going on there. There I saw Sholem Asch, who came rarely but come he did. I saw a great many writers, like Perle. They mostly sat by the bar. Every week, there was a meeting with some author or actor, and interesting discussions would go on forever. My knowledge of Yiddish comes actually from there since earlier I had been a militant Hebraist.