

# The Great Wall of Ivansk

*One man's struggle to bring a cemetery to life.*

By Hillel Kuttler



Eastern memories: the town of Ivansk (Iwaniska), Poland

When his five children were growing up in Narberth, Norton Taichman often spun for them the yarn of "Lem and the Blueberry Pies," which involved a boy, his mother, lots of walking, a peddler, a milk bottle and, naturally, the pies. Audrey Taichman (owner of Audrey Claire restaurant, near Rittenhouse Square) recalls imagining her father's story as "an elaboration of the truth of his life," and knowing that she wanted to see where Lem grew up.

In recent years, Audrey, along with her parents, sister, brothers, nephew, cousins and neighbors, has done just that, visiting the birthplace of Lemel Tajchman, Norton's father, in Ivansk (Iwaniska), Poland.

Their most recent trip climaxed Norton's efforts to restore the Jewish cemetery of what he calls the "forgettable little town" northeast of Krakow. Along the way, Taichman tightened the link between the primarily Ontario-based community of Ivansk expatriates and their descendants and their ancestral home, and created a bond with residents of the town that he hopes represents his legacy beyond memorializing the dead.

What the Taichmans learned on their visits both dispelled and confirmed some of their preconceptions about Poland and Poles. They heard about those who saved Jews in World War II. They also met a man who followed his father's instruction to comply with the Nazis' order to deport Jewish children while the father went to claim a newly vacant home. The man, Stephan Viktor, showed the Taichmans the very wagon he had used to transport the children and remarked that the children escaped before reaching the train station. Viktor would prove to be one of Taichman's key contacts in a cemetery-restoration project.

The "stories and vibes" that come Taichman's way indicate that "not all was black and white," he says.

Taichman, a retired professor of pathology at Penn, came late to his passion for all things Ivansk. Lemel, who left the shtetl with his family at age 15, in 1920, always deflected questions about his childhood. After his father's death in 1986, Norton became engulfed by, as he puts it, "sentimentalism, romanticism, nostalgia" to learn what he could — "to find out about myself," he says.

On sabbatical in England in 1996, Taichman and his wife Louise signed up for a trip to Poland. They hired a guide, ventured to Ivansk and searched for the cemetery. Plowed fields surrounded the site, and the cemetery's vast acreage had become overgrown in the decades since the Holocaust. "There was no gate, no standing stones," Taichman says. "It was filled with thorns, trees and weeds. There was no wall to mark it."

Taichman assumed that the Nazis had desecrated the cemetery, the wall and the iron Mogen David that topped the entrance gate. He learned otherwise from residents: after World War II, townsfolk had seized tombstones for construction and dismantled the wall for its bricks. He also heard that they dug up Torah scrolls that Jews buried there on October 13, 1942, the day before they were deported, and used the scrolls to make shoes.

"I'm in this cemetery, and I'm overwhelmed with despair," Taichman tells a visitor on a lovely summer morning in his backyard. "Just the thought that here are generations of my people, and there is no trace in the whole vil-

lage of Jewish life." A stroll in the square revealed that the synagogue became a community hall, on the side of which a plaque revealed nothing about the pre-war Jewish population that numbered approximately 2,000, nearly half the town's total.

He displays a poster-sized map that another Ivansk expatriate drew of the six-square-block town and that Taichman refined. "This, for me, is the greatest treasure, this map. It gave me for the first time a sense of the jumbling, the bustle, the shops, the stores," Taichman states. "When I started out, I didn't know anything. Now, I know a lot. I feel the pulse. I know that my dad walked here."

Taichman jabs at boxes: the Wilner family, at No. 54; the Laufers (possibly relatives of his grandmother), at No. 56. "I can put myself into some sort of historical context," he says. "I wasn't just born in Toronto in 1936."

Taichman fruitlessly sought information on Ivansk through Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Then he posted a request on a Jewish genealogy Web site, and struck gold.

Grzegorz Gregorczyk, a Polish-Catholic, was trolling the Internet for data on Jewish life in his hometown, Kozenice. Because Ivansk appeared nearby on the alphabetical listing, he clicked and discovered Taichman's interest in refurbishing the Ivansk cemetery.

Taichman at first greeted with skepticism Gregorczyk's offer of assistance. He soon realized that Gregorczyk volunteered with no strings attached. Gregorczyk became a key player, visiting Ivansk several times and establishing contact with its mayor. Gregorczyk, a customer service manager for a French telecommunications company, occasionally brought his son and daughter on the 150-mile ride from Warsaw.

Taichman publicized the project through a Web site and newsletters he launched in 2003 ([ivansk.thirdeyview.net](http://ivansk.thirdeyview.net)). He also enlisted support from the Toronto-based Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society (IMBS). The cemetery renovation's \$80,000 cost was borne entirely by Ivansk descendants. Some of the tombstones that were found could not be matched with grave

sites, and instead were embedded in the stone wall that now rings the site.

The Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project has injected "new life" into IMBS, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary, said Gary Lipton, a member of the society's executive committee whose grandparents emigrated from Ivansk and who is related to Taichman. The project, Lipton said, has helped "to bring the Ivansk back to the Ivansker Society," after it had become, ironically, little more than a chevra kadisha (burial society) for Ivanskers in Ontario.

Another Ivansk descendant, David Blumenfeld, a Jerusalem filmmaker, jumped in, too. Blumenfeld, a Toronto native, has made six trips to Ivansk, interviewing residents and documenting the cemetery restoration from the clearing of the brush to the rededication. Blumenfeld hopes to conclude production of his documentary this year and to screen it at international film festivals and on Israeli television programs on Yom HaShoah.

Without Taichman, "I highly doubt that the whole thing would have happened. It took so much energy and dedication. I think that Norton was looking for hints about his father, to see his father in this place," says Blumenfeld. "It's very personal. I'm doing it for the memory of my grandfather and his family, who came from [there]."

The restoration committee also sponsored an essay contest in Ivansk's high school, encouraging students to research local Jewish history and Jewish-Polish relations. Three students received awards in a ceremony held the morning of the cemetery's rededication.

The motivation for the contest mirrors that of the cemetery rebuilding. Taichman wanted Ivansk residents, not others, to perform the labor so that they would feel emotionally invested and more prepared to preserve the cemetery better this time. Members of the committee have not yet decided who will be responsible for the cemetery's long-term care.

"I realized that we didn't just want to restore the cemetery. I wanted to establish a relationship with the town so that I could collect testimony from them. I wanted to give them a stake in it, a sense of ownership," says Taichman.

"It really has been an incredible journey. It's not over. I want to go back and check on the cemetery ... to assure its security. The town now has a stake in it. It was local people who put up the walls. They know who we are now. We're not just absentee owners who put up the Great Wall of Ivansk."

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