

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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The Ivansk “Virtual Cemetery”

by **Arthur E. Zimmerman (Toronto, Canada)**

When the Ivansk Project was being set up over a year ago, the Ivansk Action Committee decided upon various research projects and priorities to try to somehow bring alive the town of our ancestors. We determined to collect oral histories from the original Ivanskers, those who lived there and remembered what Jewish life was like in the shtetl; to try to find the rumoured Kesten-Brauner map of pre-WW II Ivansk; to look into trying to find a way to restore the cemetery; and to gather up the names of the Holocaust victims to eventually put together a Yiskor Book for the vanished Jewish town. This last objective would be done in part with information retrieved from the archives of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and in part from the memories of relatives.

We have collected quite a few rich oral histories from people who were born and brought up in Ivansk. We have found and amplified upon the wonderful Kesten-Brauner map of Ivansk (hand-drawn from memory in 1989 by Ruchel Kesten and her brother Jack Bauner, detailing the

locations of houses and the names of the inhabitants). The cemetery project, however, has been a much more difficult project to bring about.

The Action Committee's idea was to perhaps get some of our people on the ground there, and enlist some current residents of Ivansk, to search out and retrieve any desecrated tombstones that might have survived, to secure the original *feld* [*feld* is Yiddish for "field"; Jews often refer to the cemetery as "*dos feld*"], to reconstruct the gated fence and to put up some sort of lasting memorial there to our ancestors - perhaps including any retrieved tombstones. Such a project was successfully completed in the nearby town of Staszow by Jack Goldfarb of Manhattan, who travelled there many times, located at least 500 original tombstones in yards, barns, roads and walls and brought them together again in the original *feld*. Among them was the memorial marker of his own grandfather! Goldfarb was able to reach an agreement with the current town fathers to care for the site. This restorative work was all done without the formal support of Jewish organizations and at Goldfarb's own expense.

If you would like to see what he accomplished, the story of Jack Goldfarb's work is at: << <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=7925> >>.

Similar restoration projects have been successfully completed or are underway in:

- Ozarov, << <http://www.ozarow.org/> >>
- Losice << <http://zchor.org/losice/losice.htm> >>
- Karczew << <http://www.jewishsf.com/bk001103/ibones.shtml> >> ,
- Ilza (*Drildz*) << <http://members.rogers.com/ilza-cemetery/index.htm> >>

Other cemetery restoration websites are located at:

- << <http://www.savinggraves.org/nations/poland/index.htm> >> ,
- << <http://www.jewishgen.org/Cemetery/> >> and
- << http://polish-jewish-heritage.org/Eng/luty_letters.html >> .

We have three major problems in getting the cemetery project under way: First of all, the Jewish cemetery in Ivansk does not exist any more. Dr. Norton Taichman and others have been to Ivansk and have visited and photographed the site where the *feld* was located. Norton could not find any tombstones there at all. He did find and photograph a small piece of carved stone - perhaps just a corner of an old tombstone - but that was the only artefact that he could find.

Secondly, while the land is still unoccupied, it appears that the local farmers are gradually encroaching upon it with their cattle and it is possible that someone may try to claim the land some day soon. It is also not clear whether the relevant authorities would allow that land to be set aside again, in perpetuity, for the construction of a memorial.

Thirdly, the Ivansk Action Committee has neither the financial resources nor the people on the ground in Poland to do the painstaking work of locating, securing and moving any surviving stones, reconstructing the grounds to whatever extent may be possible and consecrating the ground again. It is also uncertain whether we will be able to make arrangements with local authorities to maintain and protect the property.

Perhaps we will never be able to achieve this important part of the Ivansk Project.

There is, however, another way in which the Ivansk Action Committee might be able to retrieve and reconstruct the original cemetery, to some extent at least. And that is by putting together a "**virtual cemetery**", on paper.

The idea is that we would collect the names and vital information about all of the ancestors likely to have been buried in the Ivansk cemetery in the days before the final liquidation of the town's Jews by the Nazis and the destruction of the cemetery. Because the archival records of the town have been lost or destroyed, it is unlikely that we will be able to "reconstitute" the cemetery to any great extent back beyond the late 19th century. Nevertheless, the memories of 1st generation Ivanskers and their descendants can provide a rich and wide database from which we could work, and at the same time provide other Ivansker descendants with missing information that might enable them to reconstruct their own family trees.

To construct our "virtual cemetery", we would have to specify criteria for inclusion. If the person is likely to have died and been "properly" buried in the cemetery before the Nazi deportation of the town's Jews - even those who were shot or hanged by the Germans - they would be included in the "virtual cemetery". Those shot by the Germans during the expulsion from Ivansk and those who were murdered at Treblinka, or in the forests or elsewhere, cannot have been formally buried in the cemetery at Ivansk, so they will go into the Holocaust list in the Yizkor Book instead. Those dumped into mass graves in the Ivansk cemetery by the Nazis will be included in the Holocaust list as well, if we can ever find out who they were. It certainly will be a problem to determine who, among the Ivanskers that we know about, were still alive at the time of the deportation or if they died or were killed during the years of Nazi occupation, because communication with relatives in the rest of the world was cut off by the war.

We are setting up a database on old-fashioned 3 x 5 paper cards for both the "virtual cemetery" and for the Yizkor Book project.

The sought-after data on individuals is provided on the next page. If you cannot fill-in the complete the entire card, do the best you can (if your information is a "guess", insert a question mark beside the entry):

IVANSK VIRTUAL CEMETERY AND YIZKOR BOOK PROJECT	
Surname, given names:	
Place of birth:	
Vital dates:	
Cause of death:	
Father's name / birthplace:	
Mother's name and maiden name/ birthplace:	
Spouse's name:	
Business / career:	
Location of dwelling (on the Kesten-Brauner map):	
Names of children:	

On the back of each card will be noted all of the sources of the information collected. This database will tell us the average lifespan, something about the mobility of our ancestors (whether

they were born in Ivansk or came there or left after marriage), the epidemiology, the range of trades and family size, and may supply raw materials for the amplification and/or construction of many family trees.

The headings on the Yizkor database cards will be pretty much the same. But, for a proper Yizkor book we are going to need photographs and printed artefacts, like passports, census records, calling cards, postcards and letters to tell about everyday family life in Ivansk.

To date, we have about 70 names, 45 of them in the Holocaust list, using accounts from letters received by the Ivansk Project, from the few testimonials we have, like Ignacy Goldstein's, and from some of the oral history interviews. In some cases, we have only a surname and gender. In some cases only the surname of a parent and a child's given name. It's going to be a mammoth task to find and sort it all out. A lot of this material may never be able to be properly and independently verified, because there are just too few who remember and because the same stories may be repeated and embellished within families. Unfortunately, some of the written accounts we have are confused, variant spellings of names make identifications difficult, and people of different generations can be confused because the given names are passed down in the family. As two examples, from ambiguities in his account (see Ivansk e-Newsletter Number 3, March-April, 2004), we cannot tell which two of Ignacy (Yitz'hack) Goldstein's three brothers were caught and hanged by the Germans, and we also can't be certain whether Goldstein may be referring to the same man by the names Sztulder and Sztulberg. We hope that the accumulation of great amounts of personal data will help us sort out these problems and make possible the definitive identifications of the people.

The Ivansk Action Committee hopes that this project description and appeal will prompt interested descendants to send us names of ancestors and copies of any personal data that survive in family records or in memories. Reconstitution of a "virtual cemetery" for Ivansk, even if it turns out that the actual feld cannot be preserved and restored, will be a lasting memorial to the relatives whose graves were desecrated and obliterated during and after WW II, as well as an undeniable testimonial that a vital Jewish community lived in Ivansk and called it home for many centuries. If the actual feld can be preserved and restored, this project will certainly add to it many names and identities that may never be physically recovered.

Let us all act now to make certain that the preservation of the memories of the lives of our ancestors becomes more than an idle dream! Act now, before the living links to our past in Ivansk are gone! It is almost too late!

This is a project in which all Ivansk descendants must participate to achieve success, because the Action Committee has no means to collect YOUR family information unless you send it to us! This project will not go ahead without YOUR active participation.

Please forward all data about your Ivansk ancestors to:

Dr. Arthur E. Zimmerman,
514 Brunswick Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5R 2Z5,
or by e-mail to << arthurz@look.ca >>.

Please send good copies of documents and photographs, not the originals!

NOTE: One of the websites listed above, << <http://www.jewishgen.org> >>, contains an excellent database of family names, town names and contact names and addresses for pursuing Jewish family research. Although it is fairly easy to learn to use, we are preparing an article on how to navigate the Jewish Genealogy website for a future issue of this e-newsletter.

My Early Life: A Memoir

by Max Carl Blumenfeld

Written in Yiddish in 1990 and translated into English by his son,
Morry Blumenfeld (Jerusalem, Israel)

[Editorial material by Morry Blumenfeld is placed within brackets]

This is the history of my early life in Europe.

I was born on Dec 4 1904, which in the Jewish calendar was the 10th Teveth, 5665. My parents, Moshe and Blima Rochel Blumenfeld, had a daughter, Machla, - we called her "Machscha" - 3 years before I was born. My father, z'l [*zichrono livrocho*: of blessed memory], was born on the 6th of January 1881 in Staszow [*Stashev* in Yiddish], the town in which at least three or four generations of his family lived. He moved to Iwaniska [*Ivansk*], about 20 kilometers north of Staszow when he married. My mother, z'l, was two years older than my father; she and her parents and grandparents were all born in Ivansk, as was I.

Iwaniska was a small town on the road between Staszow and Opatow [*Apt*]. There were four hundred Jewish families in the town, and probably about 5000 total inhabitants, Jewish and Gentile. The synagogue and the Bais Hamedrash [Study Hall] were on the road to Rakow. The houses were of stone or wood construction, almost all one storey although there were also two storey houses, particularly around the central square. On the central square was the Magistrat, the city hall, and several stores. Also in the center of the square was a roadhouse inn which was owned by the Rotenberg family (the grandson of this family was a familiar politician in Toronto) [who now – 2004 – spends his time between Toronto and Jerusalem].

My mother's whole family was known by the nickname *Abalokes*, meaning "belonging to *Aba'le*", deriving from my mother's grandfather's name, which was *Aba* (diminutive *Aba'le*) *Zaltsman*. His was a well-known name in town, and in the surrounding villages. The gentiles of the villages used to say "we are going to the *Abalonkes*" (they added an "n" sound to the name) to indicate that they were going to shop at any of the enterprises of my great-grandfather or his children. He was a "*Feltscher*" or a "*Rofeh*" [someone who had medical understanding and would dispense medical advice, but without a real medical degree] but in addition had various enterprises in town, and fields outside the town.

About two kilometers from town, beside one of his fields there was a spring called "*Abale's stock*" [*stock* is a Polish word meaning spring] after him. Before Pesach it was my task to go to the spring

and draw water to make the raisin wine we used for Pesach. Abale's house and the outbuildings surrounding the courtyard occupied about 2 dunams. The outbuildings surrounding the courtyard were used as stables for horses and animals and storehouses for lumber. Behind this courtyard was another large yard, which had a building, called a "stodele" [? probably a barn-like structure] in which the wheat was threshed and which was used to store the products from the fields - wheat, rye, oats and hay for the animals.

As you can imagine this house was very big. There was a store on the south side of the building and another on the north side. In the middle were many rooms. One room was very big with an adjoining small room. This big room was a "shtible" [an informal prayer house] where we davened Shabbos and Yom Tov. (The women prayed in the small room.) There were 2 Sefer Torahs which my great grandfather had written on his behalf. He and the whole family on my mother's side were chassidim of the Rebbe, Rab Kalmisch (Kalonymos = Kalmen) HaLevi Epstein, the author of the sefer "*Me'or v'Shemesh*" (Light and Sun). I was named Mordechai Kalmen, Kalmen after this Rabbi. [Kalmen is an interesting Yiddish name. It is short for Kalonymos, which is the Yiddishized version of the Greek name, Kalynomos = good name or Shem tov in the original Hebrew.]

My great grandmother's name was Chaya Sarah. She and Abale had five sons and one daughter. I had the privilege of knowing my great grandfather Abale personally; he died when I was five years old, i.e. in 1909.

When his son, my maternal grandfather, Yisroel Tzvi married my grandmother Chaya Shprinze [Shprinze is also an interesting Yiddish name that illustrates how long names were passed on from generation to generation. It derives from the Ladino/Spanish Esperanza, which means Tikvah in Hebrew or Hope], they took over the store on the south side of the building [I assume this was the general store mentioned below]. My grandmother Chaya Shprinze was fifteen years old when she married. She quickly became an *eshet chayil* [a woman of valour, named after the beginning of the chapter of Proverbs which is recited at the Shabbat table before Kiddush on Friday night], wise in business and in family affairs.

My grandfather's brother, Yitzchok, became a partner with my grandfather when he married my great aunt, Tilleh. His role was to buy grain from the farmers and in fact, grandmother managed the store (my grandfather and his brother were occupied in the grain business and feed was sold in this store). The grain was shipped to Russia and elsewhere. When the children of my grandfather and great uncle were grown, grandmother Chaya Shprinze saw to it that the two brothers opened another store which sold various articles, eg, groceries and household articles (it was a real old time General Store). To manage this store they put into it my aunt, the *Mima* [aunt] Hinda [her married name was Plonka – and she lived in Toronto] and her cousin Sheva, the daughter of Yitzchok and Tilleh, before these girls got married. When the time came for my mother, Blimah Rochel, to marry, grandmother opened another store [I assume this was some type of dry goods store], in partnership with my parents, and put my mother's sister, the Mima Rochmeh (later Lederman) into the store to help. This aunt moved to Palestine in the early 20's and she and her husband were very close with Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, who was the outstanding rabbinic authority of matters relating to Jewish law and life in the Orthodox community in Israel, known as the *Hazon Ish* (so called as is the custom, after the title of one of the key books he wrote, Hazon Ish means the Vision of Man).

I want to note that Yitzchok did not live in the same building where Yisroel Tzvi and Chaya Shprinze had their store. There was another building on the south side of his store where he lived, but between the two buildings there was a passageway for horses and wagons to drive into the courtyard and into the storehouse for the grain. In back of his dwelling there was a lumberyard.

It appears that my great grandfather was a rich and well known personage, since the great grandchildren were also called "Abalonkes" after him. Everything was idyllic until the First World War [1914-1918]. After the war, when Poland became independent from Russia [1919], anti-Semitism became unbearable. The Poles would pounce upon Jews, tormenting elderly Jews by pulling at their beards and yelling "Zhid'zhe tu Palestina" (Jews go to Palestine). It is appropriate to remember this today, when once again the Poles are enjoying a measure of independence from the Russians, and once again the stench of anti-Semitism can be smelled in a Poland now free of Jews. In addition, today's Pope, who grew up in this same atmosphere in Poland should be reminded of this chant as he meets with Yasser Arafat and other "Palestinians". [This statement was written in the early 90's]

To write about everybody in the family will take considerable time, so I will concentrate on myself, my upbringing and my life in the town.

I have already mentioned that I was born on the 10th of Teveth 5664. My recollection of childhood is *b'h beseder* [o'kay]. I remember how my mother, z'l would hold me tight on winter Saturday nights on her lap wrapped in her large warm shawl with tassels, as she recited "*Gott fun Avrohom*" [God of Abraham, which was recited by women after Havdalah marking the end of the Sabbath] before we were able to light the first lights. Another thing I remember is that when I was two years old my mother took me with her to see the Mima [Aunt] Yehudis, her younger sister, not married. She was very sick at the time. The Mima Yehudis called me to her bed and gave me a pear.

Another episode. Our dwelling consisted of one room. It was a kitchen, dining room and bedroom. and next to it was the store. In the summertime my father, z'l, would get up early and open the store, then sit down with a sefer and either learn, or say *T'hillim* [recite Psalms]. I was not yet three years old, when I would run out in my nightshirt. Our dwelling and the store was on the highway to Apt, the Apter Weg (Opatow Highway). One time, running out, I saw in the middle of the road, spread out, lots of money, consisting of 10 and 25 ruble notes, altogether several hundred rubles of Russian money. I picked up the end of my nightgown and collected the money into the pouch so formed. I ran into the store where my father saw this and took it away from me, and told me not to tell my mother. I listened to him and did not tell my mother. When my father z'l died about twelve years later, I told her then, saying that I did not understand why we always needed money. When he would buy material he would always borrow money from the "*g'milas chesed*". [Mutual Benefit Fund - a fund which loaned money without interest]. I told her about the time when I was a small child and I found lots of money, some hundreds of rubles, which in that time one could use to buy a nice house. She told me that she knew about it, that father told her about it. She told me that he waited six months in case the person who lost the money would appear. Nobody came. He distributed all the money to the poor. He did not want to benefit from the misfortune of another.

When I became three years old, my mother took me to Cheder. This was a great ceremony. They smeared raisins and sugar on the aleph-bais [the Hebrew alphabet] and distributed it to the children who were there. This was the traditional way to motivate the children with a desire to learn, in other words, teaching them that learning was sweet.

When I became five years old I already learned everything the original teacher taught, and had to change to a second teacher and began learning *Chumash*. I learned with this teacher until I was nine years old when I went to a third teacher to learn *Gemora*. While I was learning with this teacher, the First World War broke out.

A year before the war broke out, a man came around in our small town holding in his hand a brown piece of perfumed paper, calling out "*Kopyecka pochnia*" (in Polish, "two groschen a smell"). That

is, he was selling the perfumed paper for a very small coin. He went all through town not missing even a small pathway.

When the war came to our town, the Germans came from Rakov, and the Austrians came from Stashov, in a pincer movement. The man who was selling the perfumed paper was an officer with the German detachment that came into town. Before the Russians left our village they took the schochet [ritual slaughterer] as a hostage from the town in order to assure that the town remain loyal to the Russians. They sent him into deepest Russia, and from Russia they brought a whole village of people as refugees into our town whom we had to sustain. All the people of that village were Jews. The battle raged across our town for 6 weeks, with the Russians on one side and the Austrians on the other side.

There was no hospital in our town, so the town created a hospital for the wounded soldiers in the courthouse. There were many wounded soldiers. They lay everywhere, on the floor and wherever they could find room. My father z'l would take me with him to the hospital, where he would give out sweetmeats [candy] to the soldiers. He would also try to find out whether or not there were any Jews among the wounded or dead. They had "dog tags" which gave their name, and if they were also circumcised this would be an indication that they were Jewish.

My father's brother, Itche Garfinkel, was in the Russian military and was lost in the war. His wife remained an *agunah* all her life [a woman whose husband has left without granting a divorce, so she cannot remarry]. Their daughter Miriam escaped by foot to Russia during the last World War [WWII]. She is now [1990] in Holon in Israel with her daughter and grandchildren.

The whole period of the first WW the Austrians occupied our town, until 1918. The economic situation was not too bad at this time. However, as soon as the Poles became their own masters the situation went from bad to worse. They would propagandize not to purchase from the Jews.

I studied at my third Rebbe until I was twelve. After this I went into the Bais Hamedrash, where older boys would teach the younger boys. Reb Yakele Aron's would teach certain selected youths [Reb Yakeleh Aharons Mandelmilkh was mentioned in "*The Funeral*": see Ivansk e-Newsletter III, March-April, 2004]. A number of different *bocherim* [youths] would teach me. The last one I had was Yechiel Alter Goldman, the best student of Reb Yakele Aron's. He was known in town as Yechiel Yakele Esther's, that is the son of Yakele who was the husband of Esther. He was my rebbe and friend; I would wake him in the morning an hour before the other boys would come to learn. The other boys would also come early in the morning. But the reason we came an hour early was that we learned reading and understanding Yiddish. He had a dictionary from which we did our studying. There were no teachers for learning Yiddish - only girls learned Yiddish; the boys didn't. When the other boys came to learn we would begin by studying a *shiur* [lesson] in Talmud.

The night before the Russians abandoned the town they made a pogrom against the Jews. The soldiers were robbing Jews and also wanted to enter the shul to destroy it. A tall Jewish cavalryman stood guard in front of the shul not to allow this to happen. This happened on a Thursday night.

I want to remark here that our dwelling belonged to a Christian Pole, Buntor. It was a big building of two floors. On the second floor there lived a Jewish doctor, Dr. Schochet on one side, and on the other side there were Police offices. During the war, military officers were billeted there. That Thursday evening, the soldiers broke down the door of our store that was on the first floor. The landlady went up to the officer's billet and asked them to make sure that the soldiers would not rob or damage the stores. The officers went down and told the soldiers to depart. There was no money damage but my sister ["Machscha"] was strongly afraid and she vomited and coughed

blood. This happened at the beginning of 1915. For two years my parents and the Grandmother tried their best but my sister died on Yom Kippur 1917 at the age of 16. She was a very pretty girl with a beautiful character. The whole family felt a very great loss and thereafter my Grandmother became ill from her sorrow. She died about a year later, z'l. This was in 1918.

When these disasters began they seemed to have no end. My father then began feeling poorly, and got a lung illness. He tried various medicines for two years and various places with better climate, eg. *Shtavnitz* [I am not able to confirm the identity or location of this town], but nothing helped, and he died also on 20th Kislev 5681 (1920). He had been with his mother, Chaya Etta Garfinkel, in Stashov, from after Yom Kippur until he died, because it was not very good for an ill person at our house, since we only had one room that served as kitchen, etc. There was more room at my paternal grandmother's house since she had two large rooms as well as a kitchen, and only she and her daughter, my aunt, Rivka Raisel, lived there. He died there in Stashov and was buried there.

But this was not yet enough. My mother became ill. There were many illnesses after the war including the flu epidemic, scarlet fever, typhus, etc. My mother became ill with typhus. My brothers Yehoshua and Shapsy went to our grandmother and I was left to look after my mother. After a few weeks she became well, then she began to look after me, since I became infected while I was looking after her and became very ill. I was so ill that no one was sure whether I would live or die.

Postscript

My father's Jewish name was Mordechai Kalman ben Moshe. He began writing and dictating this memoir about 20 years ago at the urging of my son, Jeremy. But he never completed his story. I don't know why: it was probably one of those things that he hoped to finish some day but never did.

My father immigrated to Canada along with his brother Yehoshua in the mid-twenties. He worked in various trades including being a peddler in the mining towns of Northern Ontario. Things were tough during the great depression, and eventually his brother, my uncle Yehoshua, moved to Palestine and settled in Tel Aviv. My uncle married and had two children, all of whom live in Israel along with their families.

My father lived in Toronto. He married my mother, Shaindel bat Shmuel Zorach, in February 1937 (my mother did not come from Poland, but from a small shtetl in White Russia (Derechin), and I was born in December of that year. My sister, Hyla (Scherer) was born two years later on Aug 31, 1939. My father was a tailor and his shop was in our house on Grosvenor Street in Toronto. My mother passed away in 1984, at age 82 and my father in 2002 at age 97.

My father lived independently until he became blind at age about 90. During the last years of his life, he lived with my sister Hyla in her home in Toronto.

I married Charlotte Grafstein in 1960 - Charlotte's father and mother also came from the same area in Poland, her mother from Sandomierz (*Tsosmir* in Yiddish) and her father from Ostrowiec (*Ostrovze* in Yiddish). We lived in Toronto while I finished my PhD, then moved away to Schenectady, New York in 1967, where I worked at GE's Research Lab. I moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to start the CT Scanner Business for GE Medical Systems in 1975. I later started GE's MRI business and was responsible for the development of a number of new imaging systems. In

1998 I was asked to become the Managing Director of GE Medical Systems overseeing some of the companies GE bought in Israel. Unfortunately, my father was unable to visit us in Israel, and I know he always wanted to live here. We lived in Haifa until I retired from GE in 2002 and then moved to Jerusalem, where we currently live. Two of my four children live in Israel, David is a photojournalist working mainly for Newsweek and Time, and lives with his wife, Melissa and two children just outside Jerusalem, and Philip has just finished his stint in the IDF's *Machal* Program - a program for Americans who want to volunteer in the Army. I know my father would have been very happy to hear about both of them. My father would also have been very proud to learn that I have been elected to the Board of Governors of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

There are a few *Ivanskers* in Jerusalem, and in Israel, and perhaps this will serve to have them start to get together.

THE IVANSK TISH

“Food is far more important than nourishment: it provides an important window to view the deepest values of culture. Preparing, eating and even discussing Jewish food establishes a strong group identity with Judaism and links us individually with our families and our people’s past.” (Carol Harris-Shapiro, PhD. Assistant Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at Gratz College, Melrose Park, Pennsylvania)

In response to hundreds of requests (I should live so long), the e-newsletter inaugurates a new feature, ***The Ivansk Tish*** (The Ivansk Table).

Using food as a vehicle, *The Ivansk Tish* will evoke memories when we gathered with our families at the kitchen table. Food was never abundant in Ivansk; nevertheless, our mothers and grandmothers prepared a *tish* that engendered our sense of family, heritage and solidarity.

The following opus is the first of what we hope will become a regular feature in the e-Newsletter.

Schmaltz by Norton Taichman (Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA)

[With acknowledgements for the inspiration provided by Lloyd Rubin whose article “Memories of Real Jewish Cooking” can be found on the web]

<< <http://jewishmag.com/70mag/jewishcooking/jewishcooking.htm> >>

Schmaltz (rendered and strained chicken fat) is a primary ingredient in traditional Jewish cooking. It is the bedrock of Ivansk cuisine. It is the universal solvent in the preparation of *flayshicke* (meat) meals.

Schmaltz gives food its *ta’am* (delicious taste); it arouses memories of simpler times and the warm comforts of childhood. Those of us who were born before Weight Watchers, cardiologists, cholesterol, saturated fats, atherosclerosis, by-pass surgery, heart attacks and strokes remember *Schmaltz*...it always overflowed in the food that our mother’s placed on the kitchen tish. But times have changed: today, the *Schmaltz* container is missing or

veiled in the darkest recess of the refrigerator, behind the butter substitutes, the fat free sour cream and the soybean hot dogs. If you want to recapture the *geschmack* (bounty) of Ivansk fare, you'll have to *varf ahroyse* (throw out) contemporary dietary fads and get back *Schmaltz*. Indeed, if everyone started using *Schmaltz* again there'd be fewer conflicts and a greater sense of well being in the world.

Which came first? The chicken or the *schmaltz*? We'll never know the answer but one thing is certain: chicken *zup* (soup) is loaded with proteins, vitamins, "penicillin" and *Schmaltz*. Our g-g-g-g-g-g-grandmothers did not skim the *Schmaltz* from the *zup*: they recognized its restorative and sustaining powers. Remember well this ancient Ivansk adage: a chicken is not a chicken unless it has lots of *Schmaltz*!!

Below is a partial list of the delights that your family will enjoy when you bring back the *Schmaltz*.

Schmaltz in Snacks

- When a hungry child comes home from school, nothing satisfies more than a *shtickel* (piece) rye bread smothered in *Schmaltz* with a sprinkling of *zalts* (salt) (and served with a cold glass cream soda).
- For a *nasch* (snack) try *greebeenes* (crispy bits of chicken skin, deep fried until golden brown in *Schmaltz*, onions and salt). Rumor has it that the taste is akin to (dare I mention the word?) bacon, only better. *Greebeenes* are also terrific with beer while watching the Super Bowl or The Stanley Cup Playoffs on TV.

Schmaltz in Appetizers

Ivanskers always began *flayshicke* (meat) meals with a *forshpeiz* (appetizer).

Here are some *Schmaltzy* suggestions:

Stewed *lingen* (lungs); *gehackteh leiber* (chopped liver) or *gefilteh miltz* (spleen stuffed with flour and *Schmaltz*).

At least once a week my mother would make one or more of the following:

- Cooked lima beans, chopped raw *tzibbeles* (onion) and *Schmaltz* mashed together into a smooth humus-like paste. A piece rye bread goes well here.
- Scrambled eggs fried with chopped calf's liver, onion, pepper and *Schmaltz*. A variation of the latter combined chopped, hard-boiled *ai'er* (eggs), fried onion, liver and *Schmaltz*. These delicacies are best served with matzo or rye bread.

And then there was my mother's *chicken fricassee* (stew) made with *Schmaltz*, water, flour, paprika and a medley of fowl parts, including (but not limited to) the *hertz* (heart), *gorgle* (neck), *pipick* (gizzard), *fleegle* (wing) and the *feeslach* (feet). You haven't lived until you've dipped *Challah* into the *fricassee* sauce. Alas, in some parts of the world it is difficult to find chicken *pipicks* and *feeslach*; it seems that modern science has cloned chickens that no longer need these structures.

I bet you've never had *Ptsha* (jellied calves feet) cooked with *Schmaltz*, onions, tons of garlic, salt and pepper. I dare you to try it. As for myself, here's where I draw a line in the *Schmaltz*. I would give anything to once again enjoy any of the previous delicacies. But *ptsha*??? No way! I must have a hereditary deficiency or abnormality of the *ptsha* gene because my Ivansker ancestors enjoyed *ptsha* for hundreds of years.

My favorite *forshpeiz* was/is/always-will-be *kishkeh* (I don't know why it is sometimes referred to as "stuffed derma". Get it straight: *kishkeh* is made from a cow's gut, not a cow's skin!)

Preparing Kishkeh: First, you must somehow acquire a segment of the small intestine of a cow (a *schtick* a few feet long would be ideal);

- Turn the organ inside out.
- Soak and rinse it in scalding water and scrape the lining with a sharp knife until it is smooth and clean.
- Divide the gut into 6-8 inch sections. Sew up one end and gently stuff the open end with a mixture of *schmaltz*, flour, fried *tzibbeles* (onions fried in you know what), salt, pepper, a hint of garlic and beaten eggs.
- Keep squishing the mixture into the tube until it stuffed full. Sew up the open end and place the *kishkeh* into boiling water for about 20 minutes.
- Then put it uncovered in a 350-degree oven until the outside is crisp and turns golden brown.
- Reheat to serve and cover with light, savory gravy made from beef brisket drippings.

If you grew up in Toronto in the 1930s-1940s, you'll no doubt remember **Goldenberg's Restaurant** (strictly kosher) located on east side of Spadina Avenue just north of Dundas Street (a few steps north of Shopsowitz's delicatessen and the Victory Theatre and across the road from Switzer's delicatessen). No one (not even my Aunty Lilly) could make *kishkeh* like Mr. Goldenberg! I don't know his origins but I bet Mr. Goldenberg came from Ivansk, or one of its neighboring shtetlach because his restaurant was always packed with Ivansker landtsmen stuffing their *pisks* (faces) with his *kishkeh*.

[Ed note: *Helzel* (the poor man's substitute for *kishkeh*) is prepared like *kishkeh* using the skin from the neck of a chicken or a goose instead of the intestine of a cow. In my opinion, it's OK to refer to *Helzel* as "stuffed derma". But beware, *Helzel* is only an ersatz version of *kishkeh*. To the best of my knowledge *helzel* was never, ever served in Mr. Goldenberg's restaurant.]

Schmaltz in the Main Course

Schmaltz is a critical prerequisite in the preparation of accompaniments for chicken, beef, and lamb, such as:

- *kasha* (buckwheat) prepared with or without *varnishkes* ("bow ties")
- *farfel* (with or without chopped onions and mushrooms)
- sweet or black pepper *lockshen koogel* (noodle pudding)
- mashed *bulbes* (potatoes)
- a *matzo brie* (a fried matzo pancake)

A Pesach Potatonik

For *Pesach* my grandmother (an original Ivansker) taught my mother, who taught my wife, who taught my kids (who will teach their kids) how to prepare a big *tepple* (pot) of *potatonik* for the *seder*. In our family there are 5 reasons why this night is different from all other nights in the year...because at *Pesach* we get to eat *potatonik*. Although it is too late to include *potatonik* in this year's *seder*, it is never too early to start practicing for next year's celebration.

There are many different versions of *potatonick* (see the list on Google; www.google.com) but none compares to the Ivansk classic. An Ivansk *potatonik* is a cross between a *cholent* and a *shteyn* (rock). It may sit heavily in the tummy but it fills the house with a fragrant, heavenly aroma.

Here's how to make a *potatonik*:

[Ed note: This is a *schitt ahrein* recipe: that means no exact quantities are given. Guided by intuition, keep *schitting ahrein* until the right proportions are achieved. This recipe provides enough *potatonik* to feed an army.]

- Start preparing the *potatonik* on the evening before Pesach.
- Using a *reeb asen* (a grater), scrape at least 10 pounds of peeled *bulbis* (potatoes) until your arm goes into spasm or you completely abrade the skin from your fingers (whichever occurs first). Place the potato pulp into a large bowl
- Add 4 eggs and 3 cups of *matzo meal* ("matzo flour").
- Add lots of salt and black pepper and tons of paprika.
- Add lots and lots of *Schmaltz*.
- Stir to incorporate the ingredients. The final mixture should have a "thickish" consistency. Add more *matzo meal* or *Schmaltz* if needed.
- Pour the mixture into a deep *tepple* that has been coated with generous amounts of *Schmaltz* (non-stick *tepples* are not permitted).
- Cover the *tepple* and put it into an oven preheated to 200 degrees (Fahrenheit).
- Place a large bowl of tepid water in the oven to maintain high humidity.
- Allow the *potatonik* to bake slowly overnight and all the following day. Be sure the bowl of water does not run dry.
- Using a large *leffel* (spoon), dig out lumps of *potatonik* and serve them in chicken soup or as an accompaniment with meat (incredible with beef brisket).

Beware!!: fights are likely to break out as diners vie for a *shtick* of the crunchy crust that forms on the outside of the *potatonik*. In the unlikely event that any *potatonick* is left over, it can be refrigerated and reheated; it'll still taste good months (maybe years) later.

The Shabbos Cholent

The *Shabbos Cholent* is the Queen of Jewish soul food. Norman Salsitz has fondly described his grandmother's cholent, and an extract of his portrayal is reproduced below:

Mmm, Cholent. How we loved the Sabbath staple eaten in every Jewish home in Kolbuszowa [Salsitz's shtetl], possibly in every Jewish home in Poland. A pungent brew, made from potatoes and beans and chunks of meat, and flavored with fat from the beef and chickens and geese consumed by the household that week, cholent would simmer from Friday afternoon until noontime on Saturday, in anticipation of the close of prayers and a return home from the synagogue.

While the potatoes and beans were important ingredients, the most important was the fat [emphasis by Ed], because the amount of fat was a reflection of the meat content of the meals eaten the week before. A rich family would have a fatty cholent with more meat in it. A family that ate relatively little meat during the week got by on a cholent that was mostly potatoes and beans. It is almost as if there were some divine social engineer compensating the poor and punishing the rich through the cholent recipe. Even then, before our awareness of the subtleties of the cholesterol in the diet, cholent was called the miracle food. The Jews had enjoyed more than their share of miracles over the centuries, but the greatest miracle of all was said to be the fact that we could eat a hearty serving of cholent, lie down for a nap afterward, and live to get up again.

Cited from: "My Grandmother's Cholent". In: Three Homelands. Memories of a Jewish life in Poland, Israel and America. By Norman Salsitz. Syracuse University Press. 2002.

OK, I've said enough. Get cooking.

And remember, "Schmaltz; me ken lecken di fingers!!" (Schmaltz, finger lickin good!!).

Do you want *The Ivansk Tish* to be a regular feature in the e-Newsletter?

If you do, then it's up to you to keep it running!!

It is said that the kitchen is the holiest room in the house. And no wonder. It is where we gather as a family on a daily basis and celebrate the holidays and other important occasions. Our mothers and grandmothers tangibly expressed their love and devotion to their families in the kitchen. No other room in the house was so warm and bound us to each other.

All of us have inherited family recipes that take us back through countless generations. Please share your memories and tell us how to prepare your favorite treasures from your family's *tish*. E-mail your recipes, commentary, requests or other culinary information to us.

Fress gezunte heit!!! (Eat and Be Healthy!!!)

Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk:

A New Member of The Project's Action Committee

It's almost a year since I received an unexpected e-mail from Poland. The author was someone I did not know. He said that he had been surfing the JewishGen web site because he was interested in learning about Jewish history in his hometown, Kozienice. Although he was not able to find any information about his town's history, he offered to help me discover the Jewish past of Ivansk. His name was Grzegorz Gregorczyk.

I did not know how to react to Greg's proposal. I had never anticipated that a Polish person would contact me with such an offer. Was he a professional researcher who was merely looking for a client or was he genuinely interested in offering his assistance? I decided to respond in a friendly but reserved manner and provided Greg with some details about The Ivansk Project. I said that I would get back to him if I came

across anything on Kozenice and thought that would be the end of our encounter. But Greg rebounded with specific ideas of how he could be useful in furthering our research. I added his name to the list of recipients of our e-Newsletter and we exchanged many more letters during the following months. Early on I sensed that this guy was really sincere. Soon, we started talking about our families and how we might meet up in the future. And although I am a lot older than Greg, we have become good friends.

On his own initiative Greg has arranged to meet with the Mayor of Iwaniska to discuss ways to develop working relationships with the town. He has contacted the Jewish press in Poland to tell them about the Project and to publicize our endeavor. Greg is going all out on our behalf and his enthusiasm is very palpable. How could we ever thank him for his invaluable and generous help? It seemed appropriate to invite him to join our Action Committee, and I feel proud and privileged to announce that he has accepted our invitation.

I have asked Greg to write an essay for the e-Newsletter to give you a sense of who he is and to explain why and how he became interested in the history of Polish Jews. What follows is his response. I know you will welcome Greg to our community!

THE MEMORY

by Grzegorz Gregorczyk (Warsaw, Poland)

PIGTAIL*

*When all the women in the transport
had their heads shaved
four workmen with brooms made of birch twigs
swept up
and gathered up the hair*

*Behind clean glass
the stiff hair lies
of those suffocated in gas chambers
there are pins and side combs
in this hair*

*The hair is not shot through with light
is not parted by the breeze
is not touched by any hand
or rain or lips*

*In huge chests
clouds of dry hair
of those suffocated
and a faded plait
a pigtail with a ribbon
pulled at school
by naughty boys.*

* The Museum, Auschwitz, 1948 by Tadeusz Różewicz [translated by Adam Czerniawski]

THE MEMORY

I struggle with an empty page on the screen of my computer.

I am writing something and then deleting what I have just written. I am trying again. I feel how clumsy words fecklessly slide on the surface. But how to write about something that should not have ever happened but it did? How to write about an absolute evil? How to approach an unexplainable grief and torture that raged in this land in which it has come for me to live tens of years later? How to write about the world that has passed irretrievably away? Finally, how to write that the life goes on here?

Discovering the truth about the non-existing world of Polish Jews felt to me like a long thunderstorm.

This storm began some twenty years ago when I read the *Pigtail* at school for the first time. At that point I did not realize that it was mainly Jews that perished in Auschwitz. It might be hard to understand for somebody from overseas, but throughout the whole post-war period in Poland Auschwitz was officially a place of a tragedy of the Poles. It was only incidental that other nationalities, including Jews, were murdered there. Most probably that *Pigtail* belonged to some Jewish girl of a name of Hava or Rivka. She might have come from Warsaw or somewhere from the district of Kielce, or maybe she came from Opatov or Kozienice where I come from.

The *Pigtail* was like a thunderbolt. It hit me hard when read aloud in the classroom from a textbook. The stroke was so hard that I still bear a mark of it that I have never managed to overcome, simply because I did not want to. And still do not want to.

But everything might have gone a completely different way. As being brought up in little village in the former Kielce district some 100 kilometres south of Warsaw I was imbibed with a coarse anti-Semitism. People spoke about Jews either badly or did not speak at all. "Poland for the Poles." "It's all the Jews' fault." - this is what I heard as a child. Even though the Jewish world has passed irretrievably away in the cruellest way, the primitive mechanism of accusing Jews of the whole evil and bad luck being repeated over the centuries kept on functioning. Like a machine, like a *perpetuum mobile*, it did not stop even though those against whom it was aimed were already gone. This is the atmosphere in which I was brought up. I still have no clear idea why I did not imitate that environment. Maybe it was simply beyond my comprehension that this Jewish girl with the pigtail murdered in Auschwitz had to be killed only because she was born a Jew.

I was given to see *the stiff hair of suffocated* with my own eyes many years later. A punch again. I still see myself standing paralysed in that place where the pre-war Jewish world was murdered. The fathers of families, the mothers and the children. The *Chassidim*, the rabbis. The good and the bad. The old ones and the newly born yet with the death sentence already. They were brought in masses in the cattle-trucks while the gang of "*Übermenschen*" was tearing away their clothes and human dignity. The lord race of murderers was pushing the naked and shaved Jews to the gas chambers. To burn their bodies in the crematories afterwards. Till that moment I didn't realize that it was possible to murder the whole world.

The thunderstorm continued. Upon arrival to Warsaw for studying I suddenly realised that the murdered Jewish world talks to me with a multitude of signs. From the windows of my apartment I could see the ruins of the Ghetto wall. I experienced the first contact with the Yiddish language at the only Jewish theatre in Warsaw. I remember walking through the Jewish graveyard on a rainy day and reading my first book by Isaac Bashevis Singer. I was discovering the Jewish music for

myself; I experienced the fascination of the Hebrew alphabet; I even took a couple of language classes! It became clear to me that letting that world be forgotten would mean letting the Jewish girl with the *Pigtail* sink into oblivion.

In 2000 another thunderbolt: Jedwabne! The publication of professor Gross's book, *The Neighbours*. A shocking image: one day in July 1941, the Polish inhabitants of a little village called Jedwabne in north-east Poland didn't hesitate to chase their Jewish neighbours through the streets of the town and then locked them in a barn to burn them alive. The myth of the Poles never collaborating in the Nazi oppression; their self-image of purity clothed in snow-white attire; the constant assertion, "we have never harmed anybody; we only were victims of others." All were burned together in that barn. This new truth lashes the face like a whip. Like the Copernicus' heliocentric theory has turned the contemporary order and "the only correct truth" up side down; Jedwabne did the same with the image of the Poles' behaviour during the war, including the truth about the Holocaust. Soon after Jedwabne, other scandals broke out. Other crimes committed in neighbouring villages are being added to those already known, such as the massacre in Kielce in 1946. Luckily, they are very few but enough for the snow-white attire to be stained. And the stains consist of dry blood.

Consequently, a big national debate breaks out of the blue and involves leading Polish newspapers and magazines. Polish journalists, historians and literally everybody exchange opinions on that disastrous discovery and are quarrelling over Polish participation in the Nazi crimes.

There are two truths about Jedwabne. First, there's the truth that "Poles are the most numerous nation among the "Righteous Gentiles". And that is real. Hundreds and thousands of testimonies and documents confirm that so many Jewish lives were saved thanks to the generous help of the Poles. As a Pole I am proud of this truth and have no intention to diminish it. But there is a second reality: so many of us acted like barbarians (vide Jedwabne). Many dare to deny this truth because they believe that the value and weight of the first truth is much more important than the second. With this I cannot agree. One must not forget that the innocent people murdered inside the Jedwabne barn will never testify; they will never give any evidence of the horror they were forced to go through; they will never point out the perpetrators.

Still the Poles, unlike the Germans who have already looked deep into their history, are going through reassessment of their treatment towards the Jews during the Holocaust and afterwards.

The birth of my two children produced a totally new and unexpected understanding of the meaning of the Holocaust. Now when I hold and rock my 3-year old daughter Basia to sleep and her golden curls fall on my face, I sometimes see another clump of hair before my eyes....the *Pigtail*. It is difficult to bear.

I do realize that changing the past is beyond my human capabilities. However, I mustn't forget it. I don't have right to forget. No one has. On the contrary, one has to remember. Humanity is the system of communicating vessels. There is no way of separating the past from the present. There is no way to live without knowing that the streets of Warsaw I am crossing today, are the same streets that yesterday mainly belonged to the Jews who used to cross them going to synagogue to pray. How to live without realizing and remembering that yesterday you could see the lighted menorahs in the windows of Jewish homes on Friday evening? How to live without realizing that this yesterday world has totally disappeared?

That is why I remember. But the memory is not enough. The reason of remembering is to avoid the same tragic horror of the past to be repeated one day in the future. Well, the history of the human

kind does not allow such an optimistic view of the events: we all know how many atrocities mankind has committed. But I believe it can all turn out differently if only we remember. If we only remember the *Pigtail*.

Getting involved in the Ivansk project is for me a source of the great distinction and honor. I feel proud that as a Pole I can contribute, even in a very modest way to bringing back the memory of the Jewish inhabitants of the town of Ivansk.

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