

# THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

Issue Number 8

November-December 2004

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Gary Lipton, a staunch supporter of The Ivansk Project, is appointed to the Action Committee.

## Restoring the Cemetery in Ivansk. A Progress Report

**Lisa Newman (Toronto, Ontario, Canada)**  
**and**  
**Norton Taichman (Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA)**

Our commitment to restore the Ivansk Cemetery was announced in the last issue of The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter. The reaction to the idea has been very encouraging. Even before we've been able to launch an "official" drive for funds, we've received donations and pledges of support from several individuals. We need to raise \$50,000 (USD) to complete the project. (For a complete summary of the rationale and organization of The Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project please consult The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, Number 7, September-October, 2004).

Here is an update on what's been happening:

- On November 7, **David Blumenfeld, Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk, Audrey Taichman and Norton Taichman** met in Poland to get the project off the ground. A complete report of their journey is presented below.
- On November 28, the **Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society in Toronto** sponsored a breakfast meeting to learn more about the cemetery restoration. The Society voiced its support for the project. A summary of the meeting is given below.
- **Ellen Monheit** (Kitchener, Ontario) has compiled an extensive database of Ivanskers and their descendents. The list will be useful in canvassing Ivanskers who are not currently on our mailing list.
- **Lisa Newman and Gary Lipton** (in Canada) and **Audrey Taichman and Susan-Taichman Robins** (in the USA) are designing brochures and other promotional materials for our fundraising campaign.
- Fund-raising strategies are being discussed at different levels. The idea of a **Family Gift** has generated much interest. Here, each individual would receive their own tax receipt, but the gift would be acknowledged as being from the whole family. Other ideas include: plaques with the names of individuals or families to be placed on the reconstructed cemetery wall and silver-plated mezuzahs to acknowledge gifts at specified levels.
- On 13 December 2004 a group of workers from Iwaniska began clearing the cemetery grounds of trees, brush and other debris. This represents the beginning of Phase II of the restoration process. Originally, we thought that work would not take place until the spring of 2005, but the Mayor of Iwaniska suggested that we advance the date to get an early start on Phase III once winter ends. A full report of the cleanup will be given in the next issue of the e-Newsletter.

- Several generous pledges and donations have been received and as of December 1<sup>st</sup> we have collected \$3,900.00 (USD) and have been promised approximately \$5,000.00 (USD)
- **The cost of Phase I and Phase II of the project was \$2,900.00. Phase III will require approximately \$45,000.00** (a more precise estimate will be forthcoming once we receive and approve the architectural plans for the cemetery wall, the memorial and other expenses associated with the reconstruction (eg, restoration of recovered matzevots). To assure completion of the project by June 2005, these funds need to be realized by the middle of March.
- Phase IV of the project involves the dedication ceremony. If all goes according to plan, this will occur in Iwaniska during the summer or autumn of 2005. Further information will be available in March-April.

**We invite Ivanskers as well as non-Ivanskers to contribute to the project.**

***In Canada and the U.S. arrangements have been made for your contribution to be tax-deductible. We apologize but we are not able to provide guidelines governing charitable gifts in Israel and hope that our Israeli landsman will also generously contribute to the cemetery restoration.***

## **CANADIAN DONORS**

**In Canada, please send cheques made payable to the:  
United Jewish Welfare Fund of Toronto**

**c/o Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto  
4600 Bathurst Street  
Toronto, Ontario M2R3V2  
Attention Angela D'Aversa**

***N.B:*** In the cheque's memo line, be sure to insert:  
***"for Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project"***

**Donations can also be made on VISA or MasterCard by calling Janice Benatar at 416-631-5847 or by sending the information in writing including your Name, Card Number, Expiry Date and the amount of your donation.**

If you wish, you may designate a person you wish to honour, and a card will be sent to this person or the family to acknowledge your gift.

The Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto will deposit all donations to a special account dedicated to the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project. You will receive a tax receipt from the Foundation.

## US DONORS

In the US checks should be made payable to:

**The Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies  
PJCRP Account  
787 Delaware Avenue  
Buffalo, New York 14209**

***N.B:*** In the check's memo line, make sure to indicate "*for Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project*"

**You Can Donate On Line:** < [www.jewishphilanthropies.org](http://www.jewishphilanthropies.org) >

- You will be asked to specify which agency and which fund you want to support.
  - ***For agency, select Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project.***
  - ***For fund, type in "Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project".***

You can honor someone or send a memorial gift via this site, and the funds will be credited to the Ivansk Project. Your donation will be acknowledged by the Foundation and a tax receipt will be forwarded to you.

If you have any questions or wish to volunteer to assist in the campaign, please get in touch with either of the Ivansk PJCRP Coordinators,

- **Lisa Newman** in Toronto (416) 489-0212 ([lisa.newman.a@utoronto.ca](mailto:lisa.newman.a@utoronto.ca)) or
- **Norton Taichman** in Philadelphia (610) 664-8171 ([nstaichman@comcast.net](mailto:nstaichman@comcast.net)).

**PLEASE**

**Help Make The Ivansk Cemetery Restoration a Reality.  
If We Don't Do It Now, No One Ever Will!**

## The Ivansk Project Has Its Own Web Site

<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/lwaniska/index.html>

Thanks to **Fred Apel** and **Jewish Genealogy (JewishGen.org)** we can now surf the web and hit on our own web site. Fred set up and manages our web site. It's still under development and if you have any comments or suggestions please e-mail Fred at: [fredapel@usa.net](mailto:fredapel@usa.net)

On our Home Page you'll find two photos of the south side of the market square in Iwaniska: approximately 100 years separates these images. One photo was taken circa 1900 and the other in 1996.

Until WWII the square served as a real market place. On Monday mornings, at the break of dawn, farmers began arriving in the square. Their horse-drawn wagons were piled with potatoes, corn, apples, peaches, radishes, plums, turnips, carrots, milk, cream, wood and other commodities. Temporary booths were set up to furnish platforms for local as well as itinerant entrepreneurs: there was the widow who made cottage cheese; the tailor who fashioned ready made clothing and the huckster whose tonic miraculously cured just about every malady. The place teemed with men, women and children, horses, sheep, cows, calves, goats, ducks and chickens. A cacophony of Yiddish, Polish, moos, baas, quacks, clucks, barks and neighs permeated the shtetl.

Dozens of shop/dwellings rimmed the square and several were also located in the "Roodhouse" ("Ratusz" in Polish). Situated in the square, the roodhouse had a central passageway which permitted horses and wagons to pass through. Jewish merchants owned most of the shops in the town. Here is just a sampling: Moishe Kopstick, Shlome Alter Iwanisker and Shmeil Weisdorf were bakers; Yisroel Rotenberg, a tobacconist; Moishe Zuntag owned a candy store; Yoina Prawerman made hats; Moishe Greenshpun's butcher shop occupied a strategic corner on the square; Moishe Rotenberg's store sold men's and women's shoes; Yaacov Iwanisker, the cobbler was always busy; Yankele Rotenberg offered fabrics; Nachman Zaltzman marketed grains and cereals; Yoel Goldar and Liebish Zaltzman each ran a hardware store; Yankel Urman had a small grocery store; Yoel Greenberg was a leather-stitcher; and Yisroel Glick was a feltcher (barber-surgeon). Apparently there was even an ice cream shop. This was downtown Ivansk.

Poles and Jews; farmers, peasants and merchants; the priest, rabbi, nuns, cantor and rebbes; the water carriers, horse traders, cattle traders, wagon masters, peddlers, and beggars; the policemen, firemen, innkeeper, miller and blacksmith; the dressmakers,

tailors and haberdashers, all mingled together, greeting each other, buying, selling, trading, cajoling, cursing, persuading, gossiping, laughing and weeping.

On the surface it was chaos. No one had it easy; most Poles and Jews lived from day-to-day. But it was their world; it was predictable; it had been like this for hundreds of years. And no one thought it would ever change.

Then the Nazis came and all the Jews disappeared. Monday mornings no longer vibrated with energy. Then the communists took over, and the town decayed even further. Iwaniska fell silent and slipped into a long, deep slumber and only now does it show signs of reawakening.

## **The Ivansk Project Receives An Award From The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society**

We are pleased to announce that The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society has made an award of \$500.00 to The Ivansk Project. The award is very much appreciated, and we are grateful to the membership of the Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society for their generous vote of confidence.

The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society of Toronto is the largest Ivansker communal organization in the world. The exact date of the arrival of the original pioneers from Ivansk to Canada is uncertain, but we do know that Ivanskers started to immigrate to southwestern Ontario in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the majority settled in Toronto, other Ivansker communities are known from Windsor, Brantford, Woodstock, Hamilton, with a large community in London. Our Ivansker forefathers had the foresight to purchase a parcel of land at Bathurst and Steele's. Here, the Bathurst Lawn Cemetery has served the burial needs of the Jewish community since the 1930's. The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society continues until today to act as truly benevolent organization by its generous annual donations to Jewish causes in Toronto and in Israel.

**The award to The Ivansk Project will help finance our work to learn more about the lives of our ancestors and to reach out to more Ivanskers throughout the world. In this connection, we would like to send copies of our e-Newsletter to Ivanskers who were born in the shtetl but who do not have access to the web.**

***If you know any 1<sup>st</sup> generation Ivanskers who would like to receive the e-Newsletter by regular post, please send us their name(s), address, including country and postal code. As long as funds remain available, we will provide them with copies of previous as well as future editions of the e-Newsletter.***

## The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society Sponsors a Meeting To Discuss The Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project

On 28 November 2004 **Gary Lipton** organized a joint meeting of:

- The Executive Committee of the Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society,
- **Norman Weinberg**, the Executive Coordinator of the Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project and
- Representatives of our Action Committee.

The meeting was held in Toronto to discuss the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project. By assembling all three organizations together, it was hoped that we would share ideas and learn how we could work together. This meeting provided such a forum. In order to succeed in our objectives to restore the Jewish cemetery of Ivansk and learn as much as possible about the shtetl, we will need the help and cooperation of as many Ivanskers as possible.

In the tradition of The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society, Sunday morning meetings do not get underway until attendees are satiated with bounteous helpings of schnapps, schmaltz and pickled herring, lox, whitefish salad, bagels, cream cheese, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, cinnamon coffee cake and gallons of hot, dark java. What a great way to start the day! Only then did we get down to business.



### **Norman Weinberg**

described how he became interested in and committed to restoring Jewish Cemeteries in Poland. He spoke about the founding, administration and functions of the PJCRP and presented the video, "Return to Ozarow" which

documents the rehabilitation of the cemetery in his parents' shtetl. The primary goal of the PJCRP is to restore and preserve all the devastated Jewish Cemeteries in Poland. Over one thousand sites remain unattended, and the small numbers of Jews living in Poland today do not have the resources to undertake such a daunting task. It remains for Jews living elsewhere to help preserve the sanctity of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland.

**Norton Taichman** followed Norman and described his recent visit to Iwaniska accompanied by his daughter **Audrey Taichman, Greg Gregorczyk, and David Blumenfeld**. They received a warm reception by the town. The community offered to collaborate in restoring and maintaining the cemetery. Norton also summarized some of the new information obtained on the history of our people in the shtetl (a more extensive account of the visit to Ivansk is presented below).

**Arthur Zimmerman** was the final speaker. He outlined the purpose of **The Ivansk Virtual Cemetery and Yiskor Book Project**. He emphasized that the pending restoration of the Ivansk Cemetery makes it more important than ever to record the names of our ancestors who died in Ivansk as well as those who were killed in the Holocaust. Noting that we will never be able to recover all the tombstones destroyed or taken from the cemetery, Arthur said it was up to us, the descendents of those who once lived in the shtetl, to document who was buried in the Ivansk Cemetery.

During the presentations members of the Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society asked probing questions and expressed enthusiasm for our undertaking. They told us that they would recommend that the organization and its members support the campaign to fund the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project.

We wish to thank The Society for hosting the meeting and for their continued interest in our work.



**Members of The Ivansk Project Action Committee who attended the Meeting**

(L to R) Sonny Monheit, Ellen Monheit, Lisa Newman, Norton Taichman, Gary Lipton, Arthur Zimmerman

## The Ivansk Tish

### *Tradition* by Gary Mokotoff (Editor, "Nu? What's New?")

Reprinted from "Nu? What's New?" The E-zine of Jewish Genealogy.  
Published by Avotaynu, Inc. Volume 5, No 14, August 15, 2004

One of the sad aspects of Jewish life today is that the immigrant ancestors who fled Central and Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century for other countries throughout the world are all gone as are many of their children. Lost are many of the traditions they maintained. The problem is not unique to Jewish culture. Recently I complained to an Italian-American friend that I went to an Italian wedding and had a terrible time because it wasn't a traditional Italian wedding. Gone were the tarantellas and the bride sitting in the middle of the dance floor toward the conclusion of the event collecting gifts (money) from the guests. My friend gave a sigh of agreement and commented that -her- daughter would have a genuine Italian wedding.

The loss of the Jewish cultural past was brought home to me last night when I attended a 40th wedding anniversary party for my machutunim (daughter's in-laws) at Sammy's Romanian Restaurant on the Lower East Side of New York. The Lower East Side of Manhattan was where many Jewish immigrants lived after they arrived at Ellis Island and took the ferry to lower Manhattan to become part of the Goldene Medina (Golden Land). It was about a mile walk from the ferry slip. They had displaced the Irish immigrants who arrived a few decades earlier. Today the Jews have been displaced by Chinese and Hispanic immigrants. Sammy's is a remnant of what was once a bustling Jewish community.

The citadel of the Jewish Lower East Side, the building owned by the Yiddish-language newspaper, Jewish Daily Forward, was taken over in 1974 by a Chinese company. The Forward is now a weekly. For many decades after it was Chinese-owned, the top of the building was still adorned with the Yiddish word "Forvitz" chiseled into the top of the building. This was removed a few years ago.

The food served at Sammy's reminded me of my youth. As we sat down to eat, I noted the table was adorned with a bowl of pickles, another bowl of pickled green peppers, three bottles of seltzer (for eight people) and genuine Jewish rye bread--not the pseudo-Jewish rye bread you find in supermarkets hiding behind names like "Grossingers" and "Pechters." It was the kind of rye bread of my youth when I used to eat the center portion of the slice saving the crusty edge for last, devouring it as a delicacy.

The first appetizer was chopped chicken liver and raw horseradish topped with gribbenes (rendered chicken fat--no wonder many of our ancestors died of heart disease before the age of 60!). The second appetizer was stuffed cabbage. Stuffed cabbage is something I rarely enjoy today because no one could make stuffed cabbage like my late mother-in-law who was the daughter of immigrants. She ruined my taste for all imitations of her version.

The main course was a choice of the usual Jewish fare: steak, salmon or chicken. I elected to have steak which was offered at three levels of preparation: well done, very well done and extremely well done. There were three side dishes: mashed potatoes with fried onions, french-fried potatoes and deep-fried potato pancakes (latkes). (Still further evidence of why so many of our ancestors died of heart disease before the age of 60!) They were the only side dishes--no other vegetables.

Sammy's served a Jewish intermezzo after the main course and before desert: a genuine egg cream. An egg cream is a uniquely New York (and probably Jewish invented) drink. It consists of seltzer, chocolate syrup and milk (my apologies to my kosher friends). But to be a genuine egg cream, the chocolate syrup must be Fox's U-Bet. I am amazed the product is still made, since I always thought that the sole purpose of this variant of chocolate syrup was to make egg creams. Downing the drink required an additional two bottles of seltzer for the table.

Dessert consisted of the 40th-anniversary cake and rugelach (pastries).

It is now about 12 hours after we left the restaurant and I can still taste the food and there is a strange glowing feeling surrounding my heart.

## Restoration of the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery. A Journey To Preserve our Heritage

Norton Taichman, Narberth, Pennsylvania , USA

On Sunday 7 November 2004 my youngest daughter, **Audrey Taichman** and I arrived in Warsaw. There, we met up with **David Blumenfeld** and **Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk**. Our purpose was to visit Iwaniska to assess the attitude and willingness of the townsfolk to cooperate with us in restoring the Jewish Cemetery. In addition, we wanted to begin documenting the restoration process on film and to acquire new insights into the lives of our Ivansker ancestors.

Our journey was an incredible experience. We were treated as welcome and honored guests and every courtesy was extended to us. We met with representatives of the Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project, town and church officials and members of the community. They uniformly encouraged our proposal and offered to collaborate with us.

We spoke with several elder Iwaniskers who provided a clearer picture of what happened to our people during the Nazi occupation. They expressed a sense of loss at the tragedy that befell their Jewish neighbors and were appalled by the desecration of the Jewish Cemetery. Everyone we encountered seemed to be pleased by "our return". We are confident that the town genuinely supports the restoration of the Jewish Cemetery.

I would like to summarize our journey, but first let me introduce my companions.



**David Blumenfeld** is a third generation Ivansker. He was born in Canada but lived most of his life in the USA. Four years ago he and his family moved to Israel where he is a professional, freelance photojournalist. His work has appeared in numerous publications, such as Time and Newsweek. His grandfather, Max Carl Blumenfeld, was about 20 years old when he immigrated from Ivansk to Toronto in the 1920s. David has volunteered to produce a documentary film of the cemetery restoration as well as other aspects of Jewish Life in Ivansk. He has the experience and the equipment to guarantee a first-class documentary, which will be made available to Yad Vashem, libraries, synagogues, museums and academic institutions.



**Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk** is an honorary Ivansker and a member of The Ivansk Project Action Committee. He and his young family live in Warsaw where he is employed in the insurance industry. In high school Greg became interested in the history and culture of Polish Jews. Deeply disturbed by the nightmare of the Holocaust and the anti-Semitism that persisted in his own country, Greg resolved to do more than lament the past and has been active in furthering awareness of the lost Polish-Jewish civilization. Greg is “Our Man in Poland” and has carried out invaluable work on our behalf. He set the stage for our visit to Ivansk and acted as our guide and interpreter. It is fair to say that the reclamation of the Jewish cemetery would never have gotten off the ground without Greg’s help.



**Audrey Taichman** is a third generation Ivansker. She has a degree in political science and has studied in England, Israel and Italy. Audrey owns two popular restaurants in Philadelphia. A young, successful businesswoman, Audrey supports several charitable causes and has numerous social and business contacts in the Jewish Community. Her organizational skills are being utilized to formulate and implement several functions in The Ivansk Project. In this connection, Audrey, and her sister **Susan Taichman-Robins**, have volunteered to coordinate the Ivansk Cemetery Project fund raising campaign in the US.



**Norton Taichman.** That’s me, a second generation Ivansker. I grew up in Toronto and moved to the USA in 1972 with my wife, Louise, 5 kids and Mandy, our pet “bagel” (a cross between a basset and a beagle). I retired in 2001 as an Emeritus Professor of Pathology at the University of Pennsylvania and started a new life. The Ivansk Project has become an obsession that will not let go.

## **Warsaw. Meetings with Officials of the Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project (PJCRP).**

**Dr. Norman Weinberg** founded the PJCRP in 2001 and serves as its Executive Coordinator. The PJCRP's primary mission is the restoration, reconstruction and preservation of Poland's devastated Jewish Cemeteries. The PJCRP also seeks to document these restorations and to educate both Poles and Jews to foster tolerance, reconciliation and peace. Through the combined efforts of many Jewish and non-Jewish volunteers and groups throughout the world, the PJCRP has successfully restored several Jewish cemeteries and is currently renovating over 30 additional cemeteries in Poland.

In Poland **Mr. Andrzej Omasta** is the PJCRP Project Manager and **Mr. Wojtek Brochwicz-Lewinski** is one of his close associates. Both have strong connections with the Polish Government. These dedicated and knowledgeable men are responsible for planning and executing all phases of the reconstruction process. Their responsibilities include: assessing the condition of the cemetery; acquiring documentation necessary for reclaiming the cemetery; hiring an architect to plan the physical reconstruction; consulting with **Rabbi Michael Schudrich** (Executive Coordinator, Halachic Affairs; Rabbi of Warsaw and Lodz; and Executive Director Rabbinic Commission on Cemeteries, Warsaw/USA) to assure that Halachic requisites are adhered to during reconstruction; negotiating with local and regional officials (including religious and political authorities) to enlist their support for the project; consulting with and advising PJCRP coordinators on various phases of reconstruction.



We met with Andrzej and Wojtek in the comfortable lobby of the Europejski Hotel before and after our visit to Iwaniska. They summarized the findings of their initial survey of the cemetery (carried out in June 2004) and detailed the various phases involved in the reconstruction. In the absence of Rabbi Schudrich (who was out of the country) they outlined Halachic matters that need to be considered in rebuilding the cemetery wall and gate, as well as the placement of any recovered matzevot. They envisaged that the townsfolk would be enthusiastic about the project and that both the Parish Priest and the Mayor would lend their unqualified support. Based on their experiences in other shtetls, Andrzej and Wojtek predicted that Jewish artifacts, such as tombstones, would begin to “reappear” once the project began. Their prophecy has already come true: last June, we reported that three matzevot were found in the cemetery. None had been apparent there before, and it was thought that heavy spring rains had unearthed these

stones. During our stay in Iwaniska we were told that someone in the community had returned the stones to the burial ground after learning that we planned to reclaim the cemetery. These artifacts are being stored in a small building behind the town hall. We believe this is a positive omen of the cooperation we are likely to receive from the Iwanisker community.

A final figure of the cost of the restoration awaits the findings of the survey and the adoption of a design submitted by the architect. But something in the range of \$50,000 (USD) seems realistic. If we are able to raise the necessary funds and if no unforeseen issues arise, the work should be completed by June 2005. The dedication ceremony could then be scheduled for the summer or autumn. Ivanskers throughout the world will be invited to attend. As well, the Iwanisker community, Polish and international dignitaries, including the ambassadors of Canada, Israel and the United States and the media will be welcomed to the ceremony.

### ***Iwaniska (Ivansk).* Return to the Shtetl**

We set out from Warsaw for Iwaniska on November 9<sup>th</sup> in a rented minivan overloaded with luggage and camera equipment. On the way we passed towns and villages whose names were familiar to us, including Radom, Ilza, Ostrowiec and Opatow.

In **Opatow** (Apt; about 20 km northeast of Iwaniska) Andrzej and Wojtek had arranged for a reception by the town council. The **Mayor, members of municipal government, local historians, schoolteachers and the press** greeted us in the town hall. Everyone expressed his or her appreciation and interest in our mission. In the time of our ancestors, Apt was a large, important town, which “ruled” over numerous surrounding shtetls. There were close economic, social and political ties between Ivansk and Apt, and this tradition characterizes the present relationship between Opatow and Iwaniska.



The Mayor, **Mr Kazimierz Kotowski**, pledged to keep abreast of our progress and offered his assistance whenever possible. He told us that Opatow hoped to reclaim its Jewish Cemetery in the future. A memorial had already been constructed in the cemetery grounds, which are being maintained by school children. We were shown several matzevot that had been recently retrieved from the river (*The Opatowka*, a small tributary of the *Vistula*) and are now being stored for safekeeping. The schoolmaster gave us a brochure outlining the town's history. In this booklet we found several references to and photographs of Jewish people who once lived in Opatow. We left Opatow with a sense that Jewish Cemetery restoration was viewed as an important and noble act on the part of the community.

(The following morning an account of our meeting in Opatow appeared in *Echo Dnia*, a regional newspaper covering the area bounded by Sandomierz, Staszow and Opatow.)

After an overnight stay in Sandomierz, we arrived in Iwaniska on November 10<sup>th</sup>.



[The shops on the south side of the town square: completely renovated since my last visit. The town square has been transformed into a park with several recently planted trees and shrubs.]

The town has undergone dramatic changes since my last visit in 2000. In the past I spent 4-5 hours in Iwaniska; this time we were there for almost 3 days. This gave me an opportunity to really begin to explore the town. It was larger than I had realized, and more people seemed to be on the streets. While high unemployment continues to affect the agricultural segment of the local economy, significant investment is altering Iwaniska's appearance and personality. More trees and shrubs have been planted in the town square. The block of approximately 6-8 shops on the south side of the square has been completely renovated, and a new hardware store recently opened for business. The town hall and library on the east side of the square have received new coats of paint, and just off the square the fire hall (the site of the destroyed shul) has been converted into a community center. A new 3-story school stands proudly near the northern entrance to Iwaniska and many new and renovated houses were evident throughout the town. An open-air market operates on Friday mornings near the school and was packed with shoppers stocking up on groceries for the weekend. As before, the streets are spotless and the children are well dressed and very friendly. The initial impression is that this community of 7,400 people has a sense of pride and is not standing still.

Our first appointment was with the **Father Stanislaw Kolasa, The Parish Priest**. He had taken over the parish a year ago. He greeted us warmly and characterized the people of Iwaniska as direct, hard working and trustworthy.



Our discussions lasted about two hours, and he listened intently as we explained why we were there. We were offered tea and homemade cake similar to my mother's "break-the-fast" yeast cake, which she served on Yom Kippur. He agreed to help us succeed in restoring the Jewish cemetery and would remind his parishioners that it was their moral duty to return any artifacts taken from the cemetery. With the approach of Christmas he told

us that he would be visiting the homes of all his parishioners and use this occasion to remind them of their obligations. Further, he said he would identify older citizens who would be willing to help us on future visits to document Jewish Life in the shtetl. Finally, the Father Kolasa indicated that he would review church archives to determine if he could uncover any information that would be useful to us.

At the conclusion of our meeting Father Kolasa extended an invitation to us to attend a Special Mass the following evening to celebrate the rebirth of the Polish Republic at the end of WWI. He also said we would be welcome at a gathering in the Community Hall following the religious service. We gladly accepted his invitation.



Our next appointment was with the **Mayor of Iwaniska, Mr Kazimierz Zoltek** who also expressed his desire to assist us. He said that most of the town was in favor of our plan to reclaim the cemetery, but there were some who were against the idea, although he did not say why. He was aware of similar projects in other towns and felt that this undertaking would enhance Iwaniska's reputation. We told him that we intended to hire local people to work on the project: in other towns this has proven to engender a sense of pride in the venture and to minimize the chance of vandalism. The Mayor regretted that Iwaniska could not provide any financial help but would assist in other ways. For example, he believed that students and townsfolk would help clear and maintain the cemetery grounds. In this context, he pointed out that the town recently cooperated with the Russian Embassy to renovate the Russian Military Cemetery, which is on the road to the Jewish Cemetery.

We talked about setting up a scholarship fund for senior high school students to encourage tolerance and reconciliation between our peoples. This idea has been successfully implemented by the PJCRP in other towns and involves writing essays on subjects that promote mutual respect and understanding. Such topics as the "Jews of the Former Shtetl", "Jewish Life and Culture in the Shtetl", "The Impact of Jewish Culture on Poland", "Relations between Christians and Jews in the Shtetl Before and During the Shoah" would be appropriate. Students will be encouraged to interview older relatives and citizens who still remember the Jews of the shtetl. The faculty will judge the essays and winners will receive cash awards; say, \$100 for first, \$75 for second and \$50 for third place. Both the Mayor and our delegation felt that this competition represented a vital component of the project. While the amount of money involved is very modest, we are optimistic that it will help to create new bridges between the Iwanisker and Ivansker communities.

Finally, Mayor Zoltek indicated that Iwaniska celebrated its 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2003 and that a book was being planned to mark the occasion. He said that Jewish history in the shtetl must be part of the story and that he would appreciate our help in this enterprise.

When we had concluded our formal discussions, the mayor introduced 3 **senior citizens** who were eager to help us learn more about our ancestors. These people

were born in the 1920s and were teenagers during the Shoah. All of them wanted to talk about the past and expressed regret about the loss of Jewish friends. We were very moved when they recalled the names of several school chums and told us about their day-to-day interactions with the Jewish community. Our reception was so warm and their desire to communicate so genuine that we arranged to meet separately with each of them the following day. We met their families and discussed some of their memories of the past (a detailed summary of their statements will be published in a future e-Newsletter). The Mayor concluded the interview with two rounds of vodka “L’Chaims/Na zdrowies”, assuring that everyone left the conference room in an upbeat frame of mind.



Whenever we were invited into anyone’s home, we were introduced to the family and refreshments were set before us. Similarly, positive interactions occurred when we encountered people on the street. Men and women of all ages would come up to us and start a conversation. They told us where David Blumenfeld’s grandfather and other families lived. They related that the Germans restricted the movements of Jews by posting signs around the town warning that if Jews ventured beyond this point they would be shot. We found out how the great fire of 1941 was started. It destroyed the synagogue and several houses bordering the market square and lead to the Nazis slaughtering 10 Jews in retaliation. We were told that the mayor, police chief, priest and several others tried valiantly to help their Jewish neighbors. Yitz’chack Goldstein and Rabbi Rabinowicz were named as leaders of the Jewish Community. The forest where several young Jews tried to hide from the Germans was pointed out to us, but we did not have time to visit the site. These and other revelations will be reported in the future.

For me, the most poignant tale concerned the deportation of the Jewish Community to Treblinka. At least 3 people told us what they had witnessed; I shall paraphrase the testimony of **Stefan Viktor**:

*I was 16 years old in October 1942. At about 11:00 pm on the night of the roundup, many Germans surrounded the Jewish dwellings shouting, “Raus! Raus!!” They carried spotlights that lit up the area so that no one could escape. The Jews were herded to the market square. Most of them carried some belongings but the Germans forced them to leave their meager possessions at the eastern border of the town square. Those who refused to vacate their homes or could not move fast enough were shot.*

*About 8 families of deported Viennese Jews were included in the group. For some reason they were permitted to keep their belongings.*

*The following morning, about 8-9 hours after the roundup, the Jews were assembled for the march to Cmielow. The Germans forced Poles who had horse and wagon to transport small children, old people and pregnant women. The rest of the people had to walk. My father was one of those who were compelled to turn up at the square, but he told me that I would have to take his place driving the wagon. My father stayed behind so that he could enter a claim for abandoned Jewish property.*

*About 2,000 people formed into a long column, leaving town via the Road to Opatow. There were about 30 wagons in the procession; my wagon carried about 18 children. I knew one of them whose name was Glick: he hid under the driver's seat.*

*On the road from Opatow to Cmielow bandits held us up. These were not members of the underground but outlaws who were bent on robbing us. Even the Germans were afraid of them and submitted to their demands. During the confusion of this encounter about 30-40 Jews escaped from the line. I don't know what happened to them.*

*As we approached Cmielow, my wagon tipped over spilling the children onto the roadside. Glick was not hurt and escaped, but I never saw him again.*

This is may be the only eyewitness account of the actual march that our people made on the road to Treblinka. I believe that Mr Viktor was very forthcoming because he revealed that his father wanted to capitalize on the Jewish tragedy. My colleagues and I shared this impression on other occasions when those being interviewed did not mask incidents that reflected poorly on the behavior of some of their own people (for instance, see testimony on the decimation of the Jewish Cemetery below).



On the 11<sup>th</sup> of November we attended the Special Mass in the Church and the reception that followed in the Community Hall. Father Kolasa made special reference to our visit during the Mass, and Mayor Zoltek introduced us to his people in the Community Hall. We were treated as dignitaries, and everyone was extremely friendly. A note about the young people who we encountered during the celebration: most were high school students and exhibited the exuberance of the young. Many spoke English and planned on going abroad after graduation; we exchanged email addresses and invited them to visit us if they were in our vicinity. It was a memorable evening.

But there were no happy moments when we stood in the **Jewish Cemetery** because this place represented the end of a story that spanned hundreds of years. We visited the site every day. It is only a short drive from the shtetl but it was easy to miss unless you have good directions. As described in previous e-Newsletters, the cemetery is situated on a gentle slope in the midst of plowed fields. In the distance one can see the shtetl, rolling hills and dense forests. It is a lovely setting but a lonely place.



On several occasions we met people walking past the cemetery on their way to town or nearby farms. Most were willing to engage us in conversation. Amazingly, I met three women who I knew from previous visits; they recognized me but I did not initially recognize them. These people told us that the cemetery was larger than we had initially thought and pointed to where the walls and gates once stood. They indicated that some of the ploughed fields were encroaching on the cemetery (a survey of the site will determine the precise boundaries of the cemetery).



One afternoon Stefan Viktor accompanied us to the cemetery. He was able to locate the site of a common grave where an unknown number of murdered Jews had been buried. Over the years many Poles have paid homage

to those who were buried here. The evidence to support this conclusion was the fact that we found remnants of many glass vases used by Polish people to house memorial candles. We were very touched by this finding.

On the other hand, we also heard disturbing testimony on the desecration of the cemetery. When the Germans occupied this area, no one was permitted to enter the cemetery, and in 1944 the graveyard was still intact when they fled before the advancing Russian army. Shortly after the war ended, some Poles from Iwaniska and surrounding communities raided the graveyard removing all the tombstones which were used as building materials and grinding stones. This despicable act was carried out despite the admonitions of the parish priest. As if this were not enough, we were told that some people began searching for buried treasure in the graveyard probing the ground with “wooden sticks” [more likely steel rods]. They discovered the Torahs that our people had buried there the day before the deportation. And unbelievably, the Torahs were used to make shoes! For all of us this was a very, very hard moment.

On our last visit to the cemetery David lit a Yahrzeit candle at the common grave and all of us recited The Kaddish.

Our time in Iwaniska was both bitter and sweet. We heard terrible stories of the final moments of the Ivansker Jewish Community. We were revolted by the cruelty of the German occupiers and the behavior of a minority of the Polish people in Iwaniska. But we also learned that in those tragic times most of the people in Iwaniska were not antagonistic towards the Jews and that many tried to assist them. We witnessed first-hand the generous, warm welcome that today's Iwaniskers extended to us, the descendents of those who once lived here. We will not forget the past but we must also look to the future.

Poland is now a democratic nation allied to the West. A new generation of Poles is growing up in a more tolerant and open society. We lived together for hundreds of years. Poland once provided a haven when most of Europe shunned our people. Is it not possible to forge a new understanding that encourages reconciliation and respect for each other? Our scheme to restore the Jewish Cemetery in our ancestral shtetl is being undertaken in a climate that bodes well for future relationships between Poles and Jews.

**Postscript:** About 2 weeks after returning from Iwaniska, I received a note from Andrezj Omasta and Wojtek Brochwicz-Lewinski indicating that the Mayor of Iwaniska had offered to begin clearing the cemetery of trees, brush and debris on 13 December 2004. I was delighted with the news, although I regretted that neither Audrey nor I could be there. However, Andrezj, Wojtek, Greg and David will be there, and in a future e-Newsletter they will describe the experience. Hopefully, all will go well and some long-forgotten matzevot will turn up. When winter ends, Phase III of the restoration will get underway. We must raise the funds to finance this major stage of the project. Please help and contribute whatever you can to realize this mitzvah.

I had intended to illustrate our visit to Ivansk with several photos of the town and its people. But a nasty glitch has taken command of my photo web site, and the technical support people have not figured out what's wrong.

Rather than delay publication of the e-Newsletter, I shall notify you once the problem has been solved and the photos have been posted to the web.

## Gary Lipton Joins The Ivansk Project Action Committee

Gary Lipton of Toronto has accepted an invitation to become a member of our Action Committee. Gary is a high energy go-getter who is the youngest member of the Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society's Executive Committee. He is a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Ivansker and is married to Bonnie Gould; they have 3 daughters (Lili, Noa, Dina). Gary had a previous life as an archeologist in Israel and is currently self-employed in the import-export business in Toronto. Gary has been a staunch and vigorous supporter of The Ivansk Project and his appointment to our Action Committee is certain to enhance the goals of our organization.

### The Ivansk Project Action Committee

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## The Ivansk Project Subscriber Directory is Cancelled

The Ivansk Project Subscriber Directory (IPSD) has been abandoned due to lack of interest. The Directory was intended to allow members to enter the names of Ivansker families and individuals who they are trying to locate, identify or learn more about. Only 3 members of our readership responded to this offer.

In the future you are welcome to submit the names of living or dead Ivanskers who you are trying to track down and we will publish your inquiry in the e-Newsletter.

**e-mail Norton Taichman:**

- With comments, questions, suggestions, etc.
- If you are missing earlier editions of the e-Newsletter.
- If you want to add someone to our mailing list.
- If you want to have a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Ivansker receive the e-Newsletter by snail mail.
- If you want your name removed from our mailing list.

***May the Festival Lights Shine on a World at Peace***

**HAPPY CHANUKAH!!!!**

***To Our Colleagues and Friends in Poland***

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!!**

***And to Everyone***

**HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!**