

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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- **Louis Rotenberg: My Life in Ivansk and in Toronto.** Transcribed by his niece, **Lisa Newman Greenspan.** Louis Rotenberg reflects on his childhood in the shtetl during the late 1800s and on his family's encounter with Toronto at the turn of the 19th century.
- **A Scholarship Fund is Established in the Jr. High School in Iwaniska in Conjunction with the Restoration of the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery.**
by Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk Students in Iwaniska are being encouraged to learn more about the lives of the Jewish people who once shared their town.
- **Keynote Address by Aleksander Kwasniewski, President of the Republic of Poland To the American Jewish Committee.** The President describes some of the steps his country is taking to bring peace and reconciliation between Poles and Jews.
- **Progress Report on the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project.**

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!!!!

Louis Rotenberg: My Life in Ivansk and in Toronto

**Transcribed by his niece, Lisa Newman Greenspan
Toronto, Ontario, Canada**

Louis Rotenberg was my uncle (1888 –1961), my mother’s third oldest brother. He was born in Ivansk and came to Canada as a young boy. In 1960 my uncle and his daughter, Radha Ahuja, recorded some of his memories on audiotape. I have transcribed and edited the tape, excerpts of which are presented below.

By way of background, my uncle’s father (and my grandfather) was Elazar [“Luzer”] Rotenberg. To escape being drafted into the Russian Army, Elazar immigrated from Ivansk to Montreal and then to Toronto in 1893. He left behind his wife, Rivka Cukier [of Zavichost], whom he married in 1883, and four children, including Louis. The family was reunited in Canada in 1894 or 1895. Elazar and Rivka had a total of eight children, who survived to adulthood, as well as a child who died in Toronto in 1906 and several miscarriages.

In his memoir Louis describes his boyhood in Ivansk, where his grandfather Naftaly Hertz Rotenberg owned the ‘rathouse’ [“roodhaus”] or inn that was located in the market square. He tells about immigrating from Ivansk to Canada at 7 years of age, and growing up within a tight-knit Jewish community in what was then a very anti-Semitic Toronto environment.

In Toronto Elazar’s elder sons worked in the business with him and within a few years they had established themselves as successful rag dealers and later steamship ticket agents and property owners.

The Rotenbergs’ early arrival and material success and the fact that in those early days they were one of the few families of cohanim all made them prominent in the Toronto immigrant Polish/Jewish community at the beginning of the 20th century. Many Rotenberg descendants still live in Toronto; among them are several supporters of the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project. It is believed that Naftaly Hertz [died Ivansk 1885] and his wife Leah Blumenfeld [died Ivansk 1916 - see photo] were buried in the Ivansk cemetery.

Louis Rotenberg

Born Yehuda Leib son of Elazar HaCohen in Ivansk, 14 December 1888.

I was born in the little town of Iwaniska which is in the *poviat* or county of Opatow [Apf] in the *gebernye* of Radom, in former Russian Poland. This was a little more than 72 years ago.

One of the first things I can recall is when my late brother Max, two years older than myself, and I used to call on my grandmother and grandfather Naftaly Hertz Rotenberg and his wife Leah Blumenfeld Rotenberg, to get a *groschen* apiece. There were a hundred *groschen* in a *ruble*, and a *ruble* was worth about 50 cents, so the value of it wasn't very great.

At four years of age I was already enrolled with a *melamud*, a Hebrew teacher, but I was too young to walk to that *melamud's* house, so the *shamus* or *sofer* called for me every day. We went there five days a week; we didn't go on Friday, nor Saturday. On one occasion we were supposed to know the *Parshas Hashavua*, the portion of the Torah being read in the synagogue on Saturday. We were taught the Hebrew and we should have been able to translate it into Yiddish at that early age. Evidently my brain wasn't big enough at that age, and I wasn't able to translate on that Thursday evening.

The *melamud* became exceedingly angry with me and hit me on the arm with a candlestick. My arm was swollen for several inches. When I came home, my mother was alarmed and asked what happened. I told her, and that was the finish: "You are not going back to the *melamud!*" Well, that pleased me. Several days later the *melamud* himself came pleading to my mother, giving all kinds of excuses, and wanting me back. The amount of money wasn't great, but it was sizeable for those days; you paid the *melamud* so much every six months.

Ivansk Living Conditions

I was only a very young boy and my knowledge and memory of living conditions there was very limited. If you take hold of a young lad today and ask him about our living conditions, he may know more than I did. I think children today in some respects are more enlightened: they watch movies, they watch television, and so forth, and those things did not exist in our country.

I suppose you could compare the living conditions in Poland in the villages almost to what existed here in Canada in the small towns 75 years ago [ie, in the 1880s]. No electricity, no gas, no toilets, no water, no labour-saving devices, nothing. The plainest of foods: if anybody needed an orange, if they had to buy an orange, it was for someone who was sick.

We had meat and eggs, of course. We had white bread [*challah*] on Friday night and Saturday. We had fish from the lakes and waters around; very often we had chicken. It was very, very plain food. For dessert very likely it would be carrots, or *tzimmes*; I was going to say prunes, but no, they would have had to be imported and there was no such thing as food importation in those days, nobody could afford it.

The village was almost all mud. The roads were almost impassable on rainy days. I recall that in my grandfather's big *rathouse* they had the foyer or the entrance where the people would gather and there was sort of a bar where they would come in to drink, and then behind that were the living quarters. We lived right on the very property that was my grandfather's. I think we lived in about three rooms altogether. There was a built-in affair for heating equipment of some kind, and two or three other rooms. Of course having four children sleep in one room meant nothing. Actually, we did the same thing later here in Toronto on Elizabeth Street: four of us slept in one room.

The Jews ate gefilte fish, herring. Maybe I am mistaken, but I think all these things had an economic base. If meat is expensive, then you've got to make a virtue out of fish. You dress it up and make it not only palatable but desirable. It is the thing to do, the thing to enjoy.

The big cities like Warsaw and Lodz lacked the provinciality of the villages; they were big centers and life there was on a different plane. I myself never went there in my youth, though; we never went to those cities.

In the *shtetl* there wasn't a great deal of activity; most people would get out of the town as soon as they had enough money to leave. There was no future there for these people.

Ivansk Education

You see, prior to the rebirth of the Polish Republic in 1918 the government didn't insist on the children going to school; they didn't provide them with schools. But in Galicia (which was partitioned to Austria in the 1790s) attendance at schools was mandatory even before reunification of Poland. However, Jews didn't neglect their children; they gave them a Yiddish education; they gave them a knowledge of Hebrew, etc. etc. So, whilst they may not have been enlightened in the sense that you would think of people here [in North America], and indeed many of them were perhaps illiterate, they were not unintelligent. The Jewish literacy rate was much higher than that of the Poles; the Jews had a passion for learning, they have had that all the time. Since they have had to have their bag on their back for the last 2,000 years, not knowing where they were going next, their wits had to be sharpened in order to compete in the world.

The second generation is a bit dulled, and the third generation is still duller in that respect. By that I mean this: *'the upper storey works overtime when your pockets are empty'*. That is certainly true for the Jews and for the Ukrainians, Polacks, the Lithuanians perhaps, though it isn't true for those who simply accept their status and who won't force themselves to rise higher on the ladder.

Ivansk Economics

It seems to me that the Jews and the Poles got on fairly well. The Jews did business with the peasants; that is, they would buy up their grain; they would buy up their lumber.

Incidentally, there was a lot of thievery because many of the people were arrested for stealing lumber. Lumber was an export item; there were a lot of forests.

They were dealing in eggs, in grain etc. etc. In Ivansk, my father was selling sugar. If you recall in the early days here, for Passover, they used to bring in cones of sugar. They were made by the Atlantic Sugar Company, I believe, and the sugar was supposed to be kosher for *Pesach*. My uncle whose name was *Tzucker*, which means 'sugar', was the representative of the firm and he got my father into this business in Ivansk.

Louis Rotenberg's Grandmother, Leah Blumenfeld Rotenberg, Wife of Naftaly Hertz Rotenberg owner of the Ivansk Rathouse. Many Leahs in our family are named for her. Her great grandchildren include: [the late] Lyla Rotenberg Rasminsky of Ottawa, Laya Rotenberg Kurtz of North Carolina, Laya Rotenberg Berkowitz of New Mexico and Laila Rotenberg Rapoport of Toronto.



My grandfather, Naftaly Hertz Rotenberg, had the *Rathouse* or hotel, which I remember very clearly. There was the main part of the hotel where the liquor was sold. There was space alongside of it, lots of space for the people to come in with their horses. Hay was kept above in the loft; we used to go to sleep there Saturday afternoons after our meals. It was delightful, new-mown hay. I don't know how well the business prospered, but evidently there was enough there for the needs of our family.

The Jews in Ivansk were *luftmenschen* or traders – one traded in wheat, one traded in lumber, one traded in eggs; they traded with the Polish community. They were doing some shipping too, outside of Ivansk, but the trade was on a small scale. The whole community I don't suppose amounted to more than a couple of thousand Jews, if that many. The whole Ivansk community amounted to perhaps 5,000; a very large percentage was Jewish.

Close by there was Opatow [*Apt*] and there was Lagow [*Lagov*], Staszow [*Stashov*], Radom and Ostrowice [*Ostrvietz*]; all had Jewish communities.

I don't believe that there would have been a dozen well-to-do Jews in Ivansk. I doubt it very much. First of all, there weren't the facilities; there weren't the means. You have to have people, you have to have resources, you have to have something to make money from. You just can't make it out of air.

There was agriculture, of course: they grew wheat, turnips. The Jews were not on the farms as a rule, though many of them did live in the country.

I remember they used to bring in raspberries in season, hampers of them – I can just see them in front of me. They would preserve them, keep them for wintertime. And of course they had cucumbers, carrots, onions, fish, herring.

Judaism, Mitzvahs

I recall there were tailors [*schneiders*] and shoemakers [*scheesters*] and butchers [*katzavs*], who were considered of the lowest class. A *schochet* [ritual slaughterer] on the other hand, the man who killed the chickens, was considered of an upper class, as was the *moyel*, the man who performed circumcision. He didn't do it for money, like they do here; he did it for the honour. It was a *mitzvah*, a just deed, one of the 613 *mitzvahs* every Jew had to perform.

A *mitzvah* is a good deed. There is nothing in the Bible to tell you that you are going to go to *Gan Eden*, Paradise. It is this world that is to be taken into consideration. It is your fellow man that you have to consider.

In this connection, I can tell you a tale about two rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, who were opposites. One was a very severe literalist, but the other had a lot of 'give' to him. So a Gentile came to Shammai and said, 'I want to learn the entire Torah in the length of time that I can stand on one leg'. Shammai became enraged and threw him out, saying 'I have studied Torah all my life and I know very little, and you want to know it all in that short length of time?' So the man came to Hillel and asked him the same question, to which Hillel said, 'Yes, I can give it to you: *Ve Ahavta Le'reyacha Kemocha* - Love Your Neighbour As Yourself'. There you have the essence of the Torah'.

These days there is less true worship, and more lip worship. Each one gropes for his God, as in the last analysis material things aren't altogether satisfying.

Immigration from Ivansk to Canada

My father had received a blue ticket or a yellow ticket from the army confirming that he didn't need to attend, that he was excused from military service. He and hundreds of others were excused on very good grounds: they 'greased' the palms of some of the Russian officials and they were all handed out these tickets.

But somebody informed the Russian government about what had been done and all these men were recalled for service. At this time my father had four children: my late brother Harry; my late brother Max; myself and my late sister Meta.

My father decided that the best thing he could do was to skip the country because service in the Russian army was brutal and cruel, particularly if you were a Jew. He left for Cracow, which was then in Galicia under the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He stayed there for three months and found that he couldn't earn a dollar. There was no work, there was nothing he could do. Father wrote my mother to come to Cracow to say goodbye and asked her to bring me along. Why I was particularly singled out, I don't know. There was my sister, who was younger than I, my brother Max two years older than me and my brother Harry who was four years younger than me. But he wanted me.

So we arrived in Cracow and that evening my father said to my mother, there is a circus on here, we'll go to the circus. So we went. And it was there that I saw for the first time white horses coming in with what I thought were naked women riding on the horses; I didn't realize that they wore tights. So I said to my mother, '*nakkedike maidlach*' [nude women].

'No', she said, 'no, no.' And she cautioned me, 'When you come home, don't tell anybody that we went to the circus', the idea being that here she was going on a sad farewell, and to go to amuse herself was considered very improper. At least, she thought so.

Well, I enjoyed the circus and we went home the following day or a day or two later, I don't recall. No sooner had I got into my grandmother's house and started telling them what happened then I said, 'We went to the circus and we saw these nude women riding around on these white horses!'. I spilled the beans.

From Cracow my father left for Montreal. In those days it wasn't a question whether it was Canada, or 'Nev [as they called it] York' or South Africa. It was a very simple matter to get into any port in the world. No passports, no visas, no restrictions, no quotas, nothing. It was really a civilized world by comparison.

He came to Rotterdam and met a couple of friends of his, a man by the name of Granatstein, who was also in the same category regarding military service. They decided to go to Montreal; they had heard of Montreal – nobody had of course heard of Toronto. Why they didn't go to New York or Boston or Philadelphia or South Africa, I don't know. But that's where they went.

He stayed in Montreal for about two months or a little longer, and received a wage of about 25 or 35 cents a day shoveling coal. So he found there was no future in that.

He heard of a friend who lived in Toronto and apparently was doing fairly well. Whether he corresponded with him or not, I don't know, but the decision was made to come to Toronto and to Toronto they went.



**Elazar and Rivka
Rotenberg,**
circa 1895
*Soon after arriving in Toronto
The child is not identified.*

He came here and as was the custom in those days, you got a bag under your arm and you went out peddling rags from door to door. He did it and from that he graduated to a pushcart and from a pushcart he graduated to a horse and rig and from a horse and rig he graduated to opening up a shop.

After two years my father sent for the family. We were then five. My late brother Meyer was born after my father reached Canada. He sent tickets for us and we were going to travel with Mr. Samson Garfinkel and his wife and two children, Charles Garfinkel and his brother Kalman Garfinkel. He purchased the tickets from the late R.M. Melville, who was located on the corner of Toronto and Adelaide Streets, across from the old Post Office.

And when the tickets came, we proceeded to Rotterdam. We got to Rotterdam and whether my father overlooked it or thought he could get away with it, I don't know: he didn't purchase any ticket for my brother Meyer, the youngest, an infant! So the company politely said, unless you have a ticket for him [which couldn't have been very much], you can't travel.



**The Four Eldest Children of
Elazar and Rivka Rotenberg**

Harry, Max, Lou and Meta
Toronto, circa 1895.

They held us for 4 or 5 days or a week. First we sent a cable to my father and he arranged the transportation. And after about a week we proceeded from Rotterdam to Hull and from there to Liverpool. We traveled on the Lake Manitoba on the old Beaver Line, which was eventually taken over by the Canadian Pacific Railway when they got into the steamship business. It took us 14 days. The passage across was rough. There were some Jewish people on board and they were very sympathetic and tried to console us. They handed us bananas which we had never seen in our lives. We looked at them and didn't know how to eat them; we took a bite of the banana without peeling it; it was bitter and when they didn't look we threw it into the ocean.

The accommodations on board were really unique. There were no doors to close off the upper and the lower bunks; there were four bunks in a section. It was what was known as steerage. And the food equaled the accommodation, but we got there, anyway. I can still recall how our mother looked after us like a chicken looks after her young; she wouldn't let us out of her sight. She was afraid, she didn't know what would take place; she was very very careful.

When we finally got to the old Union Station in Toronto, we were met with two wagons – not cabs, just ordinary wagons that were used for delivery. They had no tops, and had two boards, one on either side. We each sat on the boards.

Names

Life in those days as I recall it was rather simple. Shortly after we came to the country Mr. J.S. Granatstein – (he had already been here a year or two or more; we were relative greenies and he was the enlightened Canadian) - he took us to Elizabeth Street School and he gave us names. He

gave my brother Harshel the name Harry, my brother Mortche [which should have been Mordecai], Max. My name was Leibush, and he gave me the name of Morris. That name of Morris stuck to me till I was smart enough to leave Elizabeth Street School and go to McCaul Street School. I got into the senior fourth and I immediately changed my name to Louis.

Shortly after that I had to put on an appendix 'Jr' after my name, because my father whose name was 'Elazar' called himself 'Louis'; to distinguish myself I had to put on 'Jr.' That 'Jr.' went on until my father passed away, and then 'Jr' was eliminated.

Jews don't generally have 'Jr' after their names. There's no such thing as naming another person after a living person. You name after a grandfather, or someone who is dead. I suppose there is a certain amount of superstition attached to it. Also, I have a cousin who, when she was born they named her '*alte*'; in other words, they wanted her to live long and get old.

School

My first entry into public school wasn't a very propitious one. I couldn't speak a word of English. I came in like an African Hottentot, talking whatever language they have and there was nobody there to talk to.

There were very few Jews in the school and I cried bitterly. My brothers Harry and Max went to this school, then both Max and Harry went to Louisa Street School because they had more forms, more higher classes. Louisa School was located where the T. Eaton Company is standing now.

When I look back now to prior to 1914 when the First World War broke out, we had a very quiet life in the city, as did everybody else.

After graduating from the senior fourth form in McCaul Street Public School I didn't take the usual entrance examination, but went to the technical school for one year and took up a commercial course studying shorthand, typewriting, French and literature. The technical school was located on College Street and the site is now used by the police department for their offices. There I stayed for one year, in 1904. In 1905 I passed the examinations at the technical school and entered Jarvis Collegiate, without having to try an entrance examination. I seem to have been concerned about trying the entrance examination, afraid I wouldn't pass, so I got in, in an indirect way.

Prior to my entrance into Jarvis Collegiate, there was someone in Kingston who went into bankruptcy and at 17 years of age I was sent out there to wind up the business. I stayed away for six weeks. It was my first time away from home for any extended period. It was a very lonesome time. I stayed at the Edison home.

I was at that time a strictly Orthodox Jew, used to *davening* three times a day; in the morning *Shachris* with my *tefillin*, in the afternoon *Mincha* and in the evening *Maariv*.

The young men in Kingston were rather startled that a young fellow from Toronto was putting them to shame. Sophie Bennett lived in Kingston then and she remembers the Kingston boys were criticized: look here's a young fellow from Toronto, the big city, and he *davens* every day, he won't eat anything but kosher food and you fellows, look at yourselves. So they didn't like me very much, those Kingston boys.

After the six weeks I returned to Toronto and in the fall went back to Jarvis Collegiate. It was sort of a happy period in a way, going to Jarvis Collegiate, entirely different from going to public school, and I did fairly well, expecting that when I graduated I would go in for law. But that didn't

materialize because Father and Harry were interested in the steamship business; they were then in partnership with Samson Garfinkel.

How the Rotenbergs Became Agents in the Steamship Business

One day a man named Hersh, who had been living in New York, came in from Montreal. He had evidently done something in the United States that wasn't on the up and up and had to leave the country.

He contacted our people and Samson Garfinkel and suggested that we go into the steamship business, which they did. That was about 1899, maybe 1900 but certainly not any later than that. The steamship office was opened up in Garfinkel's office in his home on Chestnut Street. But there wasn't enough business in those days, because the number of Jews that were here in Toronto was small.

In those days we had a very limited number of Jews but they had begun to come in. There was one family here by the name of Wilner - Yidl, Moshe Abba, Yankel. In those days they were buying steamship tickets on the installment plan and they also sent money home to the old country: 100 rubles, about \$50, and if they didn't have the \$50, you charged them a little bit extra and they paid it off in regular installments.

The Wilner brothers went over to Mr. Garfinkel and said they wanted to buy steamship tickets to bring over their families. 'Who will you give as security?' Garfinkel asked, and the Wilners said, 'Mr. Rotenberg'. 'No', said Garfinkel 'I wouldn't take that'. When these men came back, the fat was in the fire. My brother Harry and my father vowed they would get even with Garfinkel, and immediately they decided to get into the steamship business themselves.

So Harry went down to the Allen Line, which was then located at 77 Yonge Street at the corner of King and Yonge, where the Royal Bank Building now stands. He interviewed Mr. Bulyer, Sr. and made quite an impression on him. They were able to talk religion: Mr Bulyer was an atheist or an agnostic. One of the books Mr. Bulyer gave Harry was "The Mistakes of Moses" by Robert Ingersoll, which I read with trepidation, thinking I would go to perdition if I didn't get rid of it.

When Harry got the agency for the Allen Line, it was an outstanding event. The business was conducted from the rag shop we had on Elizabeth Street. We didn't serve a transient trade; we catered to the people who knew us. The Garfinkels used to call up the Allen Line and ask, 'How is the rag business with the Allen Line these days?' They made it quite uncomfortable for Mr. Bulyer who called on my brother Harry one day and said, "Why don't you go and get yourself a regular office down on Queen Street instead of being up there in the rag shop?"

Harry felt that this was a necessity, a must. He bought a piece of property for \$10,000 at 151-161 Queen Street close to University Avenue. This was before 1905, about 1904.

Father's Triumphant Visit Home

Mr. Holme Smith was a great real estate operator. His pal, George Case, came to Harry one day and said 'We want to buy this property from you, and we will pay you cash'. They settled for \$25,000 cash. In money terms today [ie, 1960], that profit of \$15,000 would be the equivalent of \$150,000, not less. Well, they sold it; Harry was partnered with our father. And then my father decided he had made this profit, it was time to go see his people back in Poland. He went in 1907 and again in 1909.

In 1907 he couldn't go to Poland because it was still under Russian rule and he couldn't enter. His father, Naftaly Hertz Rotenberg wasn't living at this time. He wrote his mother, brothers and sisters, telling them to come to Cracow [at that time Cracow was in Galicia which had been partitioned to the Austrians] and that he would entertain them. They all came; he gave them money; he arranged for transportation to Canada for Harry Rotenberg, the husband of Dora Rotenberg, Meyer Kaufman, later of Kitchener and Mary Rotenberg, the daughter of Haskell Rotenberg.

Growing Up in Toronto

From the time we came to Canada until 1908 we lived at 145 Elizabeth St. Then we moved to 23 Murray Street, right next door to Bob McBride's coal and wood yard. Bob McBride was the brother of the late Sam McBride, the mayor of Toronto for a number of years.

We had to walk up from the street to the upper floor on which were located four bedrooms and a hall in the centre. To the left of it there was located what was known as a parlour. After we had been there a few years, my father, mother and myself went down to Adams' Furniture and bought this handsome three-piece parlour set for about \$39, for the whole outfit. Of course it stood there and very infrequently it was used. My mother and father's bedroom was on the opposite side. My brother Harry and myself were in the rear. My brother Max and my sister Meta had two beds in their room.

This house had no central heating of course, though it had what the Jews called a '*solf heata*'. So at night, when I would go to sleep, it was very cold in the bedroom. And in those days we didn't wear pajamas; we wore nightgowns. I would stand in front of this '*solf heata*' and warm my front and then I'd turn around and warm my back, and continue turning several times and then I'd make a bee-line for the bed in a hurry, not to lose the heat. [*'Solf heata*' refers to a coal-burning space heater found in many homes during the early 1900s.]

Then down below, you would go down four or five or six stairs – that was our living room and dining room and behind it was our kitchen. There was no gas; no running water; no sanitary conveniences. The outhouse was about 150 feet in the back yard and it was pretty cold going there in the wintertime, I can assure you. At that time we had the rag shop right next to our home.

In the morning the fire was out in the *solf heata*. Either we didn't know that you could carry a fire through all night by banking it up, or it was a case of economizing on coal – it was either one or the other. But it was miserably cold and my brother Max and I didn't want Mother to come down to make the fire, so either he or I would make the fire.

My mother kept on having children. She had altogether about twelve pregnancies. Eight remained, though only three of us are alive now. One died, [Zechariah/Saul], when he was about seven, and the others died in infancy or she lost them to miscarriages.

Parenthetically, I might say that my mother told me one day, 'Had I known about birth control, I would never have had so many children'. I was rather surprised to learn that from my mother, who was an old country lady who hadn't become greatly Canadianized or Americanized. One of the reasons I say that is because she insisted that we speak Yiddish in the house to her and she would answer in Yiddish saying, 'I know that I will never speak a good English, but you will know another language and I want you to know it'. And I am forever grateful to her, because when I went to Europe in 1923 (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania) and particularly in 1939 when I visited Poland and Russia. Yiddish was the mainstay, the main language I could use, because no matter where I went I could talk to Jews.



**Elazar and Rivka Rotenberg's
Family , Toronto, circa 1905**

This family portrait was probably taken to send back home to the old country.

Back row standing (L to R):
Harry and Max

Middle Row:
Rivka, Meta, Lazar and Lou

Front Row:
Myer, Hinde/Hilda* Charlie
and Hertzl
(*Lisa Newman Greenspan's
mother)

Many of them asked me, particularly in 1939 when I was in Moscow and Odessa, are you a journalist. I said no, I am just a tourist; I am traveling around looking at things. With me were a large number of Americans who could understand Yiddish but couldn't speak, because they hadn't been speaking the language at home.



**Hilda Rotenberg
Toronto, circa 1907**

Hilda, Lisa's mother, was the baby of the family, 20 years younger than her eldest brother Harry and 10 years younger than her sister Meta. Whereas the older kids had to leave school early to work in the business, she was encouraged to study and even have violin lessons. She completed a BA in Near Eastern Literature at the University of Toronto in 1926.

When my family came to Canada in the 1890s we were in a sense still living in Poland. There were about 1500 Jews in Toronto living in a concentrated area bounded by Chestnut Street, Elizabeth Street, Elm Street and Centre Avenue. McCaul Street was considered almost like a suburb. The fact that we were so few, the fact that we were Jews and were from a country like Russia, we needed that protection, that security, that being together, to make us feel we had richer, more secure lives. We felt insecure by being isolated.

I think one of the reasons that the Jews have been afraid to mingle too much with Christians is the fear that they would lose their identity, they would lose their sons and daughters; they would become Christians. Throughout the country in small towns Jewish shopkeepers who have children want to get to a big city as soon as their children are growing up, so that they can get a knowledge of Hebrew and mingle with other Jews and find Jewish partners.

When we came here 65 years ago, I would say a hundred percent of the Jews went to synagogue. There were only three synagogues at the time: the *University Avenue Shul*, at the corner of Elm Street; the *Kazatzka Shul* was later the *McCaul Street Shul* which eventually combined with the *University Avenue Shul* to form the *Beth Tzedec*, and there was the *Holy Blossom Temple*, which was located upstairs adjoining the Shea's Vaudeville on the corner of Victoria and Richmond Streets. The Jews had free burial societies. You hear today of people taking out life insurance policies to pay for burial. I

have never ever heard of a Jew taking out such a policy. He knows he is going to be buried.

For a celebration in the morning [presumably a *bris*?] we would buy half a dozen herring, black bread; Jews are fond of black bread. And we would go down to Dan Fitzgerald's liquor store on Queen Street or Small's liquor store at the corner of Louisa and Elizabeth Street and buy a barrel of O'Keefe's beer for a dollar and twenty-five cents, a whole barrel. And everybody would drink beer. Herring and bread: that was the celebration in those days. And I remember distinctly how we used to buy one of those black square bottles of DeKuyper's gin, the quart bottles; they used to cost, I think, 50 or 60 cents. Taxes in those days weren't very high. And when we went to lunch or dinner at my father's home, everybody would invariably take a drink of gin to begin with. And then either my brother Max or I would go down to Tiderland's [?] hotel at the corner of Agnes and Elizabeth Streets and buy two quarts of beer. That was standard practice for years.

This ceased when we became 'physical culturalists', according to the McFadden fad: we stopped drinking beer, we stopped drinking whisky, we stopped having feather beds because it wasn't healthy, we opened the windows at night and my brother Max and I stopped wearing hats.

Anti-Semitism in Toronto

As a child we would walk to our home along Teraulay Street, near Queen, where the old Shea's Hippodrome used to stand. When we got near the old Toronto Electric Light plant, which is now the hydroelectric plant on Bay Street, groups of Gentile boys would yell, "The sheenies are coming, the sheenies are coming". They would waylay us and beat us up if we couldn't get away fast enough. Most of the time we were able to get away and run to the Messinger House on Elizabeth Street. Being beaten up by such gangs was common practice all over the city in those days. [In 19th century America "Sheenies" was a derogatory colloquialism for a Jewish person.]

The Jewish peddler on foot or with his horse and rig was molested. There wasn't a day or a week that went by that somebody wasn't hurt. Jewish peddlers would be stoned; several of them had their eyes put out by stones. They formed an association to try to protect themselves. Our whole community as I recall it was fear-ridden. Whilst such practices have been eliminated, there is still plenty of anti-Semitism in Toronto.

These Gentiles thought they were God-fearing people; they were more God-less. For instance, my father closed his rag shop on Elizabeth Street on Shabbos, so he opened on Sunday and the men came to work. The Police were harassing us, watching to see if anyone was working in the plant. They wouldn't let you work on Sundays: the Police were just looking to catch you, to save a soul for Jesus so to speak. Well, they didn't save many souls.

It is only about 15 years ago that I went looking for an office in a third rate office building in the city of Toronto at Chambers and Meredith. They said all right, we will let you have the office; I agreed on the rent. The following day the agent called and said, 'I'm sorry, we cannot rent the office to you'. I said, 'Is it because I am a Jew?' And he said, 'That's right; I'm sorry'.

A Jew couldn't get into an apartment house as a tenant. During the War the late Mr. Mendel Granatstein owned an apartment house on Lawton Avenue. His son Joe, who was going to be married, let the superintendent know that he was going to move into the apartment house. The tenants all ganged up and told the superintendent to tell the landlord that if his son moved in, they would move out. Mr. Granatstein was furious; he said he was going to do this and he was going to do that, but economic necessity forced him to buy his son a home and not let him move into his own apartment house.

Though he traveled the world and read very widely, family loyalty and closeness were always values Lou Rotenberg held dear. In 1939, shortly before World War II began, he visited his hometown of Ivansk where his cousins still lived. Those Rotenbergs who did not emigrate were destined to perish in the Holocaust. And even a photograph taken on that visit of Lou with his cousins has unfortunately been lost.

Even after they were married and no longer living at home, some or all of the six Rotenberg sons – Harry, Max, Lou, Meyer, Charlie and Hertz – would often turn up at their parents' home, at 118 Spadina Road, in the middle of the work day for lunch. Their sisters Meta and Hilda would serve, aided by household help. This practice lasted at least until their father, Elazar Rotenberg, died in December, 1936.

Of Lou Rotenberg's four children, two are alive: Laya Kurtz [named for her Ivansk grandmother Leah Blumenfeld Rotenberg] lives in North Carolina and Radha Ahuja lives in Toronto. Five of Lou's grandchildren [along with his great grandchildren] live in Toronto, one in Ottawa and one in Victoria, British Columbia.

A Scholarship Fund is Established in the Jr. High School in Iwaniska in Conjunction with the Restoration of the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery

by Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk (Warsaw, Poland)

In October I acted on behalf of The Ivansk Project and the PJCRP to establish a scholarship fund in the Junior High School in Iwaniska. The award will be based on an annual essay competition dealing with the history of the former Ivansker Jewish Community and will be open to senior students. Our purpose is to promote Jewish-Polish awareness, acceptance and reconciliation. The school faculty will set the guidelines and select the topics for the competition. The faculty will review the submissions and select 3 winners: first prize, \$150; second prize, \$75; third prize, \$25.

I received a most enthusiastic reaction by the school to the idea of the scholarship. The topic chosen for the competition in 2006 is: **"We Used to Live Side by Side - Recollections of the Jewish Community of Ivansk by Elder Residents of Iwaniska"**. The students are already at work because the competition deadline is 15 January 2006.

I would like to convey a sense of the positive reception I received and the commitment of the faculty to the competition by way of a series of e-mail communications I exchanged with Gary Lipton, Lisa Newman and Norton Taichman. I shall keep you informed in more detail about what's happening in future e-Newsletters.

By the way, even though it's in Polish I think you can learn a lot about the school by logging on to its web site: < <http://unieszow.w.interia.pl/> >

----- Original Message -----

From: "Greg Gregorczyk"

To: "Norton S. Taichman"; "Lisa Newman"; "Gary Lipton"

Sent: Thursday, October 20, 2005 6:09 AM

Subject: Ivansk Project Scholarship

My Dear Ivaskers,

This is to proudly let you know that the scholarship program has just been activated!



Ewa Malinos

Last week I contacted the school director, Mrs Ewa Malinos, announcing our willingness to launch the scholarship program. Although I didn't impose any particular topic to her, I provided some guidelines and the big picture of how we imagine it and what we expect to get. Besides, the local initiative can be even more fun.

This morning Mrs Malinos called me back. She was truly excited about the idea of the scholarship; you should have heard her voice! She informed me that a Scholarship Task Force has been set up among teachers, mainly history teachers. The project leader is going to contact me by the end of next week with suggestions as to the subject of this year's scholarship. The last word however will be ours.

Best wishes, Greg

----- Original Message -----

From: "Norton S. Taichman"

To: "Greg Gregorczyk"

Sent: Thursday, October 20, 2005 11:21 AM

Subject: Re: Scholarship

Dear Grzegorz

Once again, my dear Grzegorz, we thank you for unlocking doors that have never been opened. I am very excited by the scholarship news and am looking forward to significant happenings in the minds of the students who join in the competition. As you know, I was very impressed by the openness and the energetic spirit of the students and faculty in the Junior High School. I am confident that they will make us proud. I shall plan on being at the school when the first series of awards are presented to the winners. Please extend my best wishes to Mrs. Malinos and other members of the faculty.

Warmest regards/ Norton

----- Original Message -----

From: "Grzegorz Gregorczyk"

To: "Norton Taichman"

Sent: Saturday, October 29, 2005 2:52 AM

Subject: Fw: Konkurs [contest]

Dear Norton,

Below you will find 4 ideas of topics for the scholarship program. Here is a translation of the letter I just received from one of the history teachers, **Mrs Barbara Grzeskiewicz**.

Dear Mr. Gregorczyk,

As a history teacher at the Public Junior High School of Iwaniska, I feel particularly proud to be given this opportunity of submitting the possible ideas for the first scholarship program related to the Jewish culture and history in Ivansk. Before I do so, let me inform you that we have already asked our pupils to start collecting and discovering traces of the Jewish life in our town by talking to the old people who still remember their Jewish neighbors from their childhood.

Please find here enclosed some of the topics proposals for the scholarship essay:

1. Fate of the two nations interlacing with one another: Poles & Jews - personal stories of the inhabitants of Ivansk.
2. We used to live side by side: my grand parents' recollections.
3. History of the Jews of Ivansk - a historic approach.
4. Jewish traces in Ivansk and its neighborhood.

Although such a competition is going to be held for the first time in our school, please be assured that the pupils are being constantly acquainted with the Jewish history during history classes, Polish language classes, classes of the general information of the Polish culture and society and education classes. I do hope the pupils will find the formula of this scholarship interesting and inspiring.

Please kindly pick one of the topics, suggest modifications or just feel free to provide quite another topic.

Truly yours,

Barbara Grzeceńkiewicz

Keynote Address by *Aleksander Kwasniewski*

President of the Republic of Poland

To the American Jewish Committee

15 September 2005



[On September 15, 2005 the American Jewish Committee (AJC) presented the American Liberties Medallion, its highest award, to President Aleksander Kwasniewski of Poland. In part the citation recognizes the President as a staunch advocate of human rights, mutual understanding and Polish-Jewish reconciliation. During his address to the AJC President Kwasniewski recognized the role of the PJCRP in reclaiming Jewish cemeteries as a means of honoring and preserving the memory of the once thriving Polish Jewish community.]

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would like to thank you for inviting me to attend this meeting with the American Jewish Committee. I am glad that I have the honor of meeting with such a distinguished auditorium during my current visit to the United States of America.

I have traveled to meet you from a country with which Jews have shared their destiny for many centuries. They were intertwined with the Republic of Poland for good and bad. Indeed, it was there, on the Vistula River that they developed their culture, nurtured their traditions and customs, and exerted an influence on the development of local communities. Three-fourths of the Jews currently dispersed throughout the world have their roots in Poland.

Over the 16 years that have elapsed since Poland regained total sovereignty, we have made great progress. An important part of our newest accomplishments is our new way of looking at the past. This also includes issues associated with Polish-Jewish relations. Today, I would like to tell you about the status of our cooperation with Jewish communities, about everything that serves the purpose of preserving the memory of our common past as well as of shaping good relations for the years ahead.

One of the most important – and very difficult – matters with which we have been dealing is the restitution of municipal property. Eight years ago, this issue was regulated by the Act on the State's Relationship to Jewish Communities. They have the same legal status as Christian churches. I would like to add that in March of this year a government bill was submitted to the Parliament on compensation for real estate and some other components of private property seized by the state. In its next term of office the Parliament will continue working on this document.

The Republic of Poland's authorities strongly support all initiatives that serve the purpose of preserving the sites of remembrance concerning our shared past. We highly esteem cooperation in this field with the *Poland Jewish Restoration Project (PJCRP)*, a non-governmental organization

dealing with revitalizing Jewish cemeteries. For years we have been doing our utmost to commemorate in a dignified manner the victims of the Holocaust and the sites associated with the martyrdom of the Jewish nation. Last year, in June, together with the representatives of the American Jewish Committee, I had the honor of participating in the official opening of the Museum-Site of Remembrance in Belzec. As you know best, we financed this together. This is a valuable expression of our cooperation.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

At the beginning of this year, an agreement was signed to establish the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews. This project's objective is to document the nearly 900 year-long history of our Jewish co-citizens, to depict their contribution to Poland's intellectual, cultural, economic and political development. The most modern multimedia techniques will be employed to arrange standing expositions and to present exhibits. We are very much counting on awareness about this initiative being propagated among Jewish communities. We hope that this Museum will become a fixed point in the program of visits paid by Jewish youth to Poland. We are counting on Jewish communities establishing cooperation with this new institution.

The fact that more and more is being published in Poland on the history and culture of Polish Jews gives me great satisfaction. We attach enormous weight to propagating knowledge about Jewish history and culture, about the shared aspects of our history. The date of the outburst of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, April 19th, has been recognized as the Day of Holocaust Remembrance and of combating crimes against humanity. Moreover – in January of this year the Polish Government adopted a resolution on establishing the International Center of Education on Auschwitz and the Holocaust. Its organic act was signed two days later during the celebration of the 60th anniversary of liberating the camp.

Evidence of our efforts to disseminate knowledge about our shared past may also be found in Poland's participation in the ***International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research - ITF***. The initiatives we have submitted to ITF – in which we have assumed the presidency this year – enjoy extensive recognition. In particular, this concerns numerous seminars that are supposed to assist teachers in teaching about the Extermination.

Youth exchange aimed at inculcating the idea of tolerance is proceeding increasingly more smoothly. One example of the very good cooperation in this area is the "Next Generation" initiative realized by the Foundation called Forum for Dialog between the Nations ("Forum Dialogu Między Narodami") in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee (AJC). During the March of the Living, this Foundation organizes meetings between Polish and Jewish youth from the US, Canada, Israel and European states. Personal experience and established ties make it possible to cast aside false notions and stereotypes.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

In Poland, we firmly condemn – and I want to emphasize this explicitly – all manifestations of anti-Semitism. According to the report on anti-Semitism in the world published by the US Department of State, steady decline in anti-Semitic sentiments and incidents has been recorded in Poland. This is, for me, a cause of great pride. I think that this is an effect of our educational efforts, initiatives that foster rapprochement, direct meetings. This is a result of the activity of many good-willed

people, including the hierarchs of the Catholic Church in Poland. The words of my Great Countryman, Pope John Paul the Second are frequently an inspiration for our actions: “The world must hear the warning addressed to us by the victims of the Holocaust and by the testimony given by those who survived”.

Today, we know better than at any other time what threats are embodied in acquiescing to racial hatred, xenophobia or anti-Semitism. To phenomena that easily become the hotbed of unpredictable conflicts and dramatic events. The question that we have been posing ourselves since the dark times of the Holocaust is what should be done to ensure that the tragic experience of the past is never repeated anywhere?

During an address I made last year to young Israelis at the Hebrew University I expressed the conviction that it is a special obligation of politicians, states, governments, churches, opinion-setting communities and the mass media to promulgate tolerance. For it enables communities and individuals with different cultures to cohabitate in accord.

In the course of my nearly 10-year-long presidency I have striven to combat all forms of anti-Semitism and intolerance. I said that loudly in Jedwabne, where dreadful acts of murdering Jews, citizens of the Republic of Poland took place at the hands of their Polish neighbors during the Second World War. I have always been an advocate of telling the historical truth, even the most painful truth. With the same determination I combated all manifestations of revisionism, the Auschwitz lie and historical amnesia, which would enable the nations of Europe to forget about victims who do not belong to their own nation.

In this context let me express my gratitude for Mr. David Harris’s statement – made on behalf of AJC – on the media inaccurately and falsely disseminating historical facts and information about the alleged “Polish death camps”. This statement constitutes a significant proof of our joint efforts for the triumph of truth. Therefore I would like to avail this extraordinary opportunity to express my deepest gratitude for Your commitment to peace and reconciliation, and for your friendliness towards Poland and the Polish people. I will be honored to present to You – in recognition of Your engagement and achievements – the Polish Commander’s Cross with Star, one of the highest Polish medals bestowed on foreigners.

Dear Friends!

The world exists thanks to three things: thanks to truth, justice and peace – as the words of the Talmud resound. Today, many of my countrymen are perfectly well aware that truth, justice and peace will help us – Jews and Poles – build a successful future.

May today’s meeting also be a call for international cooperation, reconciliation, tolerance and mutual understanding!

Progress Report on the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project

As 2005 draws to a close, we find ourselves within sight of reaching our fundraising goal. Donations continue to come in every day. People from diverse places and walks of life, all of whom have connections to Ivansk, have warmly embraced the project. It is particularly rewarding to those of us who are working on the project to know that Ivanskers worldwide are supportive of the restoration of the cemetery and eagerly await the completion of our work. At this time we project that construction of the enclosure wall and gate will begin in early spring 2006. Work will continue throughout the summer and we hope to rededicate the cemetery in late summer or early fall 2006. We have much work ahead of us but the importance of our endeavor continues to drive us.

I am pleased to report that the Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Fund (PJCRP) has informed us that an anonymous donor (who is not an Ivansker) has pledged \$2,500 (USD) towards the project on condition that we Ivanskers match the gift with an equal level of new funds.

I have received inquiries about whether donated funds are being used to finance trips to Poland by myself or other Ivanskers. The answer is, NO: none of the money donated to the project is being used to reimburse anyone traveling to Poland from outside the country. Further, the production of the film documenting the history of Jewish Ivansk is not being funded by your contributions. In other words, all Ivanskers who are involved in this endeavor are doing so on a purely voluntary basis at their own expense. Only non-Ivanskers who represent the PJCRP in Poland receive compensation for attending to our interests. In addition, your dollars are also being used to establish an annual scholarship fund in the local Junior High School (see details above). Our activities are completely transparent, and expenses must be approved by Norman Weinberg (PJCRP Executive Coordinator) and Norton Taichman (Coordinator of the Ivansk Project).

Whether you're a new or previous donor, your gift will make a big difference and will be a positive response to the challenge issued by our anonymous donor to match his/her generous pledge.

Instructions on how to make your tax-deductible gift are found on the following page.

As a community let us move ahead to finish the job!

Can you, will you step forward and do your part?

