

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

Issue Number 19 and 20

July - August and September - October 2006

[Editor: *Those with keen eyesight will have noticed that this edition of the e-Newsletter is 4 months behind schedule because the July-August and September-October issues were not published.*

I offer 2 excuses: first, the summer months were occupied with frenzied preparations for the re-dedication of the Ivansk Cemetery, leaving little time to assemble a newsworthy July-August edition. Second, September was even worse, and in early October I had to undergo abdominal surgery, which knocked me out of commission for about 3 weeks. Regrettably this meant that I could not attend the re-dedication of our cemetery in Ivansk.

Now it's time to catch up on the overdue e-Newsletters and start thinking about reporting on the events in Ivansk where over 40 of our people celebrated the reclamation of our ancestor's cemetery. The vast majority of participants indicated that it was a once in a lifetime experience that they will always remember.

This issue of the e-News combines the July-August and September-October editions. We're gathering material for the November-December issue which will be the first of a series dealing with the trip to Poland.]

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- **Rededicating Our Cemetery in Ivansk: Installing Our Rescued Matzevot in the Cemetery Wall.** *by Gary Lipton*
In August Gary Lipton, Grzegorz Gregorczyk and Norton Taichman gathered the remnants of our ancestor's matzevot abandoned for over 60 years and returned them to the Ivansk Cemetery where they were installed in the restored cemetery wall.
- **Finding Our Roots: A Journey to Poland.** *by Bernice & Gord Starkman*
In September Bernice and Gordon, together with their friends **Mark and Sheila Pinkus**, visited their families' shtetls, including Ivansk. Although they met several interesting and welcoming people, the journey was not an easy one as they were confronted with the tragic history of what happened to our people during World War II.
- **We Used To Live Side By Side. *Recollections of Older Inhabitants of Iwaniska of the Time When Jewish People Still Lived in Our Town.***
by Maria Kargulewicz, Beata Madej and Patrycja Rusak (Winners of the Student Essay Contest Held in the Junior Public High School, Iwaniska)
These three young women interviewed town elders who remembered their former Jewish neighbors. The information that they gathered provides an intimate glimpse of what life was like in Ivansk before the Holocaust and reveals how Poles and Jews lived together side by side.

Rededicating Our Cemetery in Ivansk: Installing Our Rescued Matzevot in the Cemetery Wall

by Gary Lipton Toronto, Ontario, Canada

[Editor's note: By the time you receive this report, the Ivansk Cemetery rededication will have taken place (on October 23). The trip was better than anyone could have anticipated. Over 40 Ivanskers attended and 100-125 local and invited guests turned up at the cemetery.

Our people are safely home again; no one left Poland without a sense of having participated in a life-altering experience. The events will be described in the next series of e-Newsletters.

Meanwhile, we thought that it was still important to report on the journey that Gary Lipton and Norton Taichman took to Poland in August, 2006. At that time the cemetery walls had just been completed and, needless to say, both Gary and Norton were anxious to see the results. But their primary agenda was to assemble our ancestors' rescued matzevot, mount and display them in the wall of the cemetery. There were other priorities, which Gary will describe below.]

On August 19, 2006 Norton Taichman and I flew into Warsaw from Philadelphia and Toronto, respectively. Although late in the day, Norton, Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk and I met for dinner to set the agenda for the next 4 days.

Our objectives were:

- To collect, sort and mount matzevot fragments that had been returned to us as well as fragments that we recovered from the cemetery during an expedition in May (see: *The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, Issue Number 18, May-June 2006*).
- In Warsaw we planned to meet with **Monika Krawczyk**, the director of the **Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ)** as well as **Andrzej Omasta** the co-ordinator of the **Polish Jewish Cemeteries Restoration Project (PJCRP)** to deal with financial and other administrative issues.
- We were most anxious to meet our friend, **Pawel Skowron** the English teacher in the middle school in Iwaniska. Through his students Pawel had identified several parents who had acquired fragments of our lost matzevot. Pawel persuaded some of them to return the stones to us.
- **Mayor Kasamierz Zoltek** would be an important player in assuring the success of the rededication celebration. He had repeatedly offered his services to facilitate our work. Now, we wanted to discuss how we would collaborate to assure that the rededication would be a significant event for both the Ivansker and Iwanisker communities.
- We also needed to meet with the stone mason in Iwaniska to discuss the design and placement of a granite obelisk to be installed in the cemetery. In this regard, we had to finalize the English, Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish inscriptions on the memorial plaques at the entrance to the cemetery and on the obelisk.
- And lastly, we had yet to introduce ourselves to **Ewa Luczynska** our travel co-ordinator. It was time to set the necessary steps in motion to guarantee the comfort and safety of those taking part in our momentous occasion.

The following morning (Sunday 20 August) we met with Andrzej Omasta in the hotel cafe. He related that the cemetery perimeter wall had been completed according to the surveyor's plan-



Monika Krawczyk
Monika stands before a gallery of photos of some of the reclamation projects undertaken by the FODZ.

545 running metres of wall enclosing an area of 7,245 square metres. The wall has a height of 1.2 metres, a width of 40-50 centimetres and a foundation depth of 1-1.2 metres (deep enough to prevent frost heave). The ironwork for the gates had been ordered and would to be set in place within the next couple of weeks.

Then, we met with Monika Krawczyk in her FODZ office. We discussed financial arrangements including payments to the contractor, the current state of our finances and the perpetual care of the cemetery. Monika informed us that once the cemetery restoration was completed that it would be the responsibility of the FODZ to provide perpetual care. Due to limited resources, she encouraged us to try to arrange an annual donation to guarantee a high level of maintenance. At the time of writing we are considering different options.

After our meeting with Monika we took delivery of our rental car and headed south from Warsaw on Highway No. 7 towards **Radom**. It was a lovely sunny day when we arrived at our first stop, **Drilz**, a small town known as **Ilza** in Polish.

In May 2006 the Drilzer Society of Toronto had just completed their cemetery restoration; the rededication ceremony was attended by Norton Taichman, Joel Rosenbloom, Russell Taichman and Elya Taichman (*described in The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, Issue Number 18, May-June 2006*). Unlike our project, which was supported by Ivanskers world-wide, the work at Drilz was the product of the Drilzer Society of Toronto.

The Jewish Cemetery at Drilz is in a quiet, beautiful setting situated on a rather steep grade which climbs upward from the entrance gate to the back of the cemetery. A forest of deciduous trees had been planted on the site after the war, and the property is now enclosed by a stone and cinder block wall. A memorial stone has been placed just inside the gate. Overall, the cemetery is characterized by its simple and tasteful demeanour.

Unfortunately, not a single matzevah was recovered in Drilz. However, it was encouraging to see that the graveyard was clean with no signs of vandalism. Wreaths of flowers recently placed by Polish visitors were lying at the base of the monument. As we walked amongst the trees, a group of local people approached the monument and studied the inscription. For us this was a positive sign that restored cemeteries are likely to be respected by the local people. It is our feeling that by maintaining our sacred sites we send a clear message to neighbouring communities that we continue to honour our ancestors and that others also bear a responsibility to respect our holy sites.

After Drilz we continued south on our journey. Many Ivanskers have ties to shtetls on the way including: Opatow (Apt), Klimontow, Sandomierz, Ozarow, Annopol-Rahav, Backowice (Baskevitz), and Zawichost. Whenever possible we try to explore these towns in search of Jewish remnants of the past. Recently, we learned that a synagogue was still standing at **Slupia (Slepia)**, located just north-west of Ivansk.

One of our Ivansker senior citizens, **Dr. Harry Linton** of Toronto, was born in Slepia, so we decided to try to find the shul and take a few pics for Harry. At the town “rynek” (central square) we enquired about the “*Synagoga Zydowska*” (Jewish synagogue) and an older gentleman sent us in the right direction. When the building came into view it did not look much like a shul. But upon close examination we identified architectural features that signalled its origins: the gabled roof style and the pilasters (engaged columns) at the corners of the building were giveaways denoting its Jewish heritage. An unsightly addition had been added since the war.

Our presence attracted local people who told us that the shul was now as an electrical shop. In the grand scope of the Polish Jewish history, the Slepia shul is but a footnote. But to us, it was a special discovery. We walked around the area, took pictures, and had the usual thoughts that any sentient being has in retrieving our people’s past in Poland. We thought of pre-war Jewish Poland, saw images of the daily life of Jewish Slepia, could visualize people entering the structure and could hear them davening. But it was a fleeting moment; our reverie was broken by the cold facts of Holocaust reality.

Back on the road heading for a night’s rest in **Sandomierz**, we passed through **Ostrowiec (Ostrovtsza)** and **Opatow (Apt)** and finally arrived at the **Basztowy Hotel**. Norton and I, as well as other Ivansker travelers, have stayed at this uncomplicated, clean, welcoming establishment. It was good to be back again!



Loading Matzevot for Transport to the Cemetery

On Monday morning, bright and early, we were on the road to Ivansk, and by 9:00 am we were in the town hall speaking with **Mayor Kazimierz Zoltek**. All of the matzevot fragments which had been secured previously had been stored in the cellar or in the shed behind the town hall. It was time to bring them out into the sunlight. Several municipal employees carefully loaded the stones into the town’s carry-all wagon and off they went to the cemetery. At last our treasures were going home where they belonged.

The contractor, **Stefan Zajak**, met us in town and in separate cars we drove to the cemetery. As we turned off the Road to Rakow onto the winding dirt road that lead to the cemetery we were thrown from side to side as

we encountered one pothole after another. Because of the on-going construction in the cemetery, the road was in worse shape than ever before. How many cars and their occupants have been lost in the deeper ruts, never to be seen again? **Mr. Kotowski**, the District Manager has promised a new road in time for the rededication. I welcomed the idea, but Norton said he would miss the challenge of bracing these terrifying last few meters to reach the cemetery.

On rounding the last turn in the road, the “Great Wall of Ivansk” came into sight. It was an incredible spectacle. The barren hill had been transformed by the stone wall that snaked up and down the slope and encompassed more land than we had imagined. The site no longer blended invisibly into the rolling hills. The cemetery was now clearly defined but required the matzevot and monuments to identify its purpose.

As we pulled up to the front gate, the men from the town were gently unloading our matzevot with the aid of a large shovel mounted on a bulldozer, and the entire day was spent in piecing the fragments together. In May when Norton had conducted the “archaeological surface survey” together with Joel Rosenbloom, Russell Taichman and Elya Taichman, they had done their best to indicate joins with numbers and arrows. By mid afternoon we arranged the fragments into 12 significant pieces or fragments that joined together. In addition there were numerous disassociated small pieces.



Entrance to Ivansk Jewish Cemetery, Aug 2006.
Pawel Skowron & Stefan Zajak (our contractor) assess progress on restoring the cemetery.

While still in town during the morning we met our good friend **Pawel Skowron**, the English teacher in the local middle school. Pawel had told his students about our search for matzevot and encouraged them to discuss the subject with parents, grandparents and neighbours. As a consequence, he was able to acquire a few matzevot on our behalf. This morning he came with additional good news: a woman in a farm just east of Ivansk on the road to Rakow had a significant-sized matzevah standing against a tool shed. With great anticipation



A Matzevah Being Delivered to the Cemetery.
A stone has been rescued from a nearby farm and will be unloaded from the trunk of the car. Matzevot fragments are piled on the ground waiting to be sorted.

we drove with Pawel to meet this woman. Suspicious of our excitement she became apprehensive and seemed to be no longer inclined to let us take the stone. The possibility of leaving without the matzevah was not even considered, and we picked it up and placed it in the trunk of the car. The woman was somewhat appeased when we promised to return on the morrow with a reward. Let it be known that we honoured our word and following Pawel’s advice we presented her with a bottle of vodka, a large bar of milk chocolate and a jar of instant coffee. Perhaps this will encourage others to

return more matzevot in the future. We will never pay with money for the return of matzevot, but we have no problem using small gifts as a token of our appreciation.



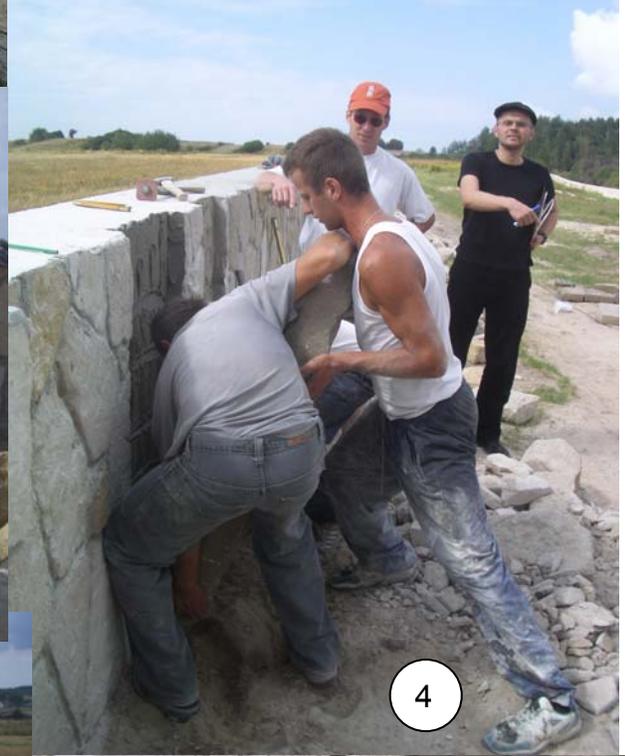
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Mounting Our Matzevot in the Cemetery Wall

1. Gary (orange cap) and Greg (black cap) sort and arrange stone fragments under the watchful eye of Mr. Zajak, the contractor who constructed the cemetery wall.
2. Greg and construction crew schlep a stone fragment that is about to be mounted into the wall.
3. Greg and construction crew begin to prepare the cemetery wall to receive stone fragment.
4. Construction crew positions fragment into cavity prepared in cemetery wall.
5. Five matzevot fragments have been installed in this section of the cemetery wall.
6. Greg and Gary decipher the inscription on this newly recovered matzevah.

Greg re-joined us in Iwaniska on Tuesday. It is always wonderful to be with Greg because he's a decent and honourable man; we share the same vision and the same "taam". On a practical level, he facilitated our interaction with the contractor and his crew because he spoke their language. By late Tuesday afternoon, 6 major stone fragments had been installed into the north wall and 7 major fragments into in the south wall. Numerous isolated stones were randomly arranged to resemble two matzevot.

The inscriptions in these stones will be printed in a forthcoming e-Newsletter. Hopefully, someone will recognize a gravestone that belonged to a relative or friend. We also hope that our Ivansker landsman will find our effort to be aesthetically pleasing.

By Wednesday noon all of the fragments had been mounted in the wall. We were ecstatic; everything we wanted to do had been accomplished. We had one more stop to make, at the home/office of the stone mason. Unexpected to us, the mason related that the letters on the inscription at the gate, and on the monument in the cemetery, were carved by a computer driven device. There is no escaping modern computer technology even in the sleepy town of Iwaniska! We selected red granite for all of our monuments and, with Greg interpreting, we explained that we wanted a pyramidal obelisk. Our objective was to create a monument in Ivansk inspired by the shape of the Ivansker monument at Bathurst Lawn Cemetery in Toronto. The templates of the texts in Hebrew, Yiddish, English and Polish as well as the technical drawing of the monument were provided to Andrzej Omasta who would be responsible for seeing that the memorial would be produced as commissioned.

The drive back to Warsaw was uneventful. But Norton and I were filled with excitement. We talked about the progress of the last few years. What had begun as a small group of about 10-15 Ivanskers had now grown into a sizeable community of over 200 people in Canada, Israel, the US, Colombia and Argentina. And more Ivanskers turn up on a regular basis. Our e-Newsletter helps to bind us closer together and has been the source of stories and history of our shtetl and our people that would have otherwise been lost forever. Old family ties had been renewed and extended and new friendships had been forged. The fact that we could count on the membership to support the restoration of our ancestor's cemetery has been especially gratifying and we are proud that so many landsman responded to our appeal for financial help. We were especially lucky to have several people roll up their sleeves to raise money from their friends and associates. Others helped organize our financial affairs and some even guided us through the legal complexities of our undertaking. The Ivansk Project is not over; we're just getting started!

After fighting Warsaw traffic we arrived at our hotel at 8:00 PM where we met our travel coordinator, **Ewa Luczynska**. We discussed the itinerary of our upcoming tour, hotel arrangements, special diet requests, and of course, pricing. Over the next two months we would exchange hundreds of e-mails and telephone calls with Ewa. We tried to design an "Ivansk-Centric" trip that would be meaningful, educational and memorable. Ewa was receptive to our ideas and worked hard to accommodate our needs. Norton felt that dealing with Ivanskers would test Ewa's mettle. After seeing how she stood firm in the face of numerous, sometimes conflicting demands he referred to Ewa as a woman of great "COURAGE" (pronounced in the French manner, "*Cou-Rage*").

Arriving in Warsaw we freshened up and met Greg and Monika for dinner and discussions. When all this began neither of us had anticipated that Poland would begin to be so familiar and that we would feel comfortable with its people. But this is what has happened. And as a consequence, the restoration project was not just putting rocks and mortar together but an opportunity to develop new insights and acquire new friends.

It was time to get some sleep. Our flights for home would be leaving early in the morning. Soon, the cemetery would be ready for rededication and it would be time to return to Poland. There was yet much to accomplish, but we left Poland in the knowledge that the recovered matzevot were secure within the borders of the cemetery in which they once stood. Each matzevah was both a headstone belonging to an individual, as well as a symbolic touchstone belonging to all Ivanskers.



FINDING OUR ROOTS: A JOURNEY TO POLAND

by **BERNICE** and **GORD STARKMAN**

Toronto, Ontario, Canada



Mark, Gord, Bernice & Sheila

POLAND, September/2006

On September 11, we, **Bernice & Gord Starkman** and our friends, **Mark and Sheila Pinkus**, left on a journey to Poland to find our roots. Because Mark had spent the first 12 years of his life in Poland and still speaks a good Polish, he became our interpreter. We flew directly to Warsaw: after arriving we shook off some of the jet lag and wandered about the city on our own. The next day we took a guided tour of Jewish Warsaw, especially the former Jewish Ghetto. Warsaw was almost totally flattened by the Nazis and later by the Russians. Only a few of the original buildings and short segments of the Ghetto wall remain.

Our tour began at what our guide said was the main entrance to the Ghetto. The entrance stands amongst tenements that have been refurbished but date back to before WWII. Here also are two intact segments of the Ghetto wall with commemorative plaques and a large map outlining the boundaries of the original Ghetto where over 500,000 Jews were isolated, humiliated and eventually deported to their deaths. The map was drawn by a Polish Holocaust and Gulag survivor, Mieczyslaw Jedruszczak. The Polish government reproduced and mounted the map in recognition of his work and his suffering. Our guide introduced us to Mr. Jedruszczak who took us to his museum/apartment where we were shown the commemorative medals he makes and the books full of signatures of dignitaries from Israel and the World. He showed us his plaque from Israel honoring him as "a righteous gentile".

The Jewish Children's Hospital was also in this area. Under the direction of **Dr. Janusz Korczak**, a noted pediatrician, psychologist and writer, Jewish orphans found refuge in the Hospital. The day arrived when the Nazis removed the children for shipment to Treblinka. Although he could have saved himself, Dr. Korczak did not abandon his charges. Comforting the children he accompanied them to the gas chambers in Treblinka where all perished.

The memorial to Dr. Janusz Korczak stands inside the entrance to the Okopower St. Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw.



Within the Ghetto we visited several points of interest including:

- The mass grave at the former Jewish Sports Centre known as the SKRA contains the remains of approximately 5,600 Jews and Poles who were butchered by the Nazis. We said Kaddish here, the first of many to follow.
- We toured the "*Okopower St. Jewish Cemetery*" (*Gensha Cemetery*), situated on the periphery of the Ghetto. It is the largest Jewish cemetery in Warsaw containing over 200,000 graves.

The graves of philosophers, great rabbis, politicians, scholars, artists and the humble are here as well as a mass grave of Jews murdered by the Nazis. The cemetery provides a glimpse of the culture and influence of the Warsaw Jewish community before the *Shoah*.



**The Heroes of the
Warsaw Ghetto Uprising**

- From the cemetery we went to **Natan Rappaport's** impressive "*Memorial to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*". Nearby was a wall dedicated to **Szmuel Zygelboim**, who escaped from a concentration camp and tried to convince Churchill and Roosevelt of the "Final Solution" instituted by the Nazis. The allies thought he was exaggerating and took no action. Zygelboim committed suicide in London on May 11, 1943.
- Our guide took us to the ruins of bunker at *18 Mila Street*. This was the command centre of the Jewish resistance led by **Mordechai Anielewicz**. Here is where he and many Ghetto fighters died at the hands of the Nazis on May 8, 1943.
- Nearby was *UMSCHLAGPLATZ* (the railway siding where Jews were loaded into cattle cars and sent to labour camps or to their death in Treblinka).
- Our last stop was the *NOZYK SYNAGOGUE*, the only functioning "original" synagogue in Warsaw to-day where once there were over 300 religious Jewish institutions. During the war the shul was used as a stable. (Mark and Sheila Pinkus celebrated Rosh Hashanah at the Nozyk Synagogue, after Bernice and Gord had left for home.)

By the end of this busy day we were drained physically and emotionally. It was hard to deal with the overwhelming reality of what happened in Poland to our people during WWII.

The next morning we began our search of family shtetls, the first stop being Mark's home town of OTWOCK.

At the Town Hall, the Mayor tried in vain to help us find the street where Mark lived as a child, but the names of the streets have been changed through the years. As we were leaving Otwock we discovered serendipitously the "*Zydovsky Cemetery*" which was in terrible disarray with damaged, broken, knocked down and scattered "matzevot". After saying Kaddish and with heavy hearts we left Otwock.

Onward to "NOWA SLUPIA", Gord's father's birthplace. But it was late in the afternoon and the Town Hall was closed. After questioning an elderly Polish man, we were directed to the area of the synagogue, which is now an electrical mechanical workshop. The owner was not very friendly and blocked any hope of entry. He grudgingly allowed us to take a photo of the exterior of the shul. The cemetery had been replaced by a fire hall and no "matzevot" could be found.

Evening was approaching and we headed for KIELCE to spend the night.



A Visit with Mayor Zoltek

The next morning we continued the search of our parent's shtetls, heading first to IWANISKA (Ivansk).

Norton Taichman provided us with Mayor **Kasamiez Zoltek's** email address as well as a hand drawn map of the shtetl as it was in the 1930's (the so-called Kesten-Brauner Map of Ivansk). Bernice and Gord recognized several names printed on the map including Blumenfeld, Bernice's mother's maiden name.

Mayor Zoltek was very gracious and invited **Stefan Viktor**, one of the town elders, to meet us and take us on a tour of the town. Norton told us that Stefan was about 16 years old when the Jews were deported from Ivansk. He was forced to take his father's horse and wagon loaded with Jewish

children to Cmielow where they boarded a train to Treblinka. On the way they were held up by bandits (partisans?) and one of the wagons overturned. A few of the children escaped but Stefan does not know what happened to them.

Our first destination was the cemetery. The field-stone wall and entranceway, while very simple, were impressive. The day was warm and sunny, but the cemetery was barren except for the few broken "matzevot" mounted on the walls close to the entrance. The walls enclosed a large empty field filled with wild grasses and contained a large mass grave in the centre. Small fragments of gravestones were scattered about. The cemetery is scheduled for rededication in late October and should be in better shape by that time.



A few Moments with Stefan Viktor and his Wife in their Garden

Shortly after we arrived at the cemetery an elderly Polish man rode up on his bicycle, hopped over the wall and introduced himself as the "wall builder". The farmer who lived next to the cemetery also joined the group. People just seem to appear out of nowhere in Ivansk and are eager to engage in conversation about the Jewish world that once existed in the shtetl.



Stefan then took us back into town, showed us where the synagogue once stood. It is now a fire hall and community centre. Stefan told us stories of the "Shidlover" rabbi who would come with horse and wagon with his Polish driver. (Shidlove is a neighboring town; see below) The driver spoke and read Yiddish and Hebrew and dressed as a Chasid. He went around town shouting "Shabbos! Shabbos!". He helped the Rabbi perform services and collected and hid the Rabbi's payment so that it would not be taken by bandits.

The Shidlover Rabbi had many followers in Ivansk and may have been Bernice's paternal grandfather. His picture (on the left) can be found in *"Image Before My Eyes. A Pictorial History of Polish Jews, 1864-1939"*.

After seeing the town Stefan insisted we go to his home to meet his wife. We were warmly welcomed, and she insisted that we accept a jar of homemade pickles and 2

large sunflowers full of seeds from their garden to enjoy on our trip.

We said goodbye to Ivansk, sad to see there were no Jews or remnants of their long history left in the town.

We climbed back in the car and continued our search.



Mostki: Mark stands beside the flour mill once owned by his grandfather,

MOSTKI was next our next stop. Mark's grandparents owned a flour mill here which we found, but the very old building was locked and abandoned.

We continued on to STASZOW (Stashev) where Bernice's father was raised. We visited the Town Hall and were told the synagogue no longer existed. But we were given directions to the cemetery. The site had been somewhat restored, with commemorative plaques from the 50's and 60's and many of the broken matzevot had been fashioned into "ohels" (tents). One plaque commemorated the discovery of the skeletons of a man and young boy found in a basement of an abandoned house in the town.

Ten minutes down the road we came to SZDLÓW (*Shidlove*), which is where Gord's paternal mother's family and Bernice's paternal grandfathers came from. Shidlove is a walled village. A map just outside the wall showed where the synagogue stood but it is now a gallery with artifacts and a commemorative sculpture dedicated to the Jewish history of the area.

During the war the synagogue had been used as an arsenal by the Nazis. Although the central "*Bima*" has been lost, the "*Aronkodesh*" is evident on the eastern wall. A few "*Matzevot*", the only remnants of the Jewish cemetery, were propped against the steps to the ark. A "*Tzedakah*" box was prominently displayed in the wall at the entrance to the main sanctuary. Women used to be seated upstairs, separated from the men; small windows allowed them to observe the men

conducting services below. Today, the women's section is used as a drug and alcohol abuse rehabilitation centre.



**Szdlow (Shidlove)
Aronkodesh in the former
synagogue**

Again into the car and onto CHMIELNIK where Mark thought he had family ties. In the Town Square there was a map showing the location of the synagogue and cemetery. The synagogue was a large imposing structure, but was locked and abandoned and sadly the interior looked destroyed. On the outside was a commemorative plaque stating that Jews had inhabited the town from the 16th century. The plaque was dedicated by the Kalish family of Israel.

Some of the shtetls we visited are still much as they were in the 30's and 40's with horse and wagon still widely used by the locals, and cows being led from the fields to the stables in town.

Before the Holocaust we were told 50% to 60% of the inhabitants of most shtetls were Jews but now there is none.

By now it was late in the afternoon and we drove straight to CRACKOW where we planned to spend the next 4 days. The former Jewish section of Crackow is called "Kazimierz", in honour of "King Casmir the Great", who welcomed Jews to this area in the 15th century when they were being persecuted in Western Europe. Casmir appreciated the potential benefits of the influx of Jewish traders and merchants at a time when Poland was still a feudal economy.



**Aronkodesh
Remu Synagogue**

Hitler did not order the destruction of Cracow and at least 6 of its synagogues remain intact. Only the smallest, the "*Remu Synagogue*", named after Rabbi Remu is still in active use. One of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Poland lies next to the Remu synagogue. It had been used as a trash dump by the Nazis but is now restored and maintained. There was also a mass grave at one end of the cemetery.

There is a tale that during the Nazi occupation an SS officer was preparing to knock over Rabbi Remu's tombstone, but he was struck dead by lightning. After that no Nazi considered touching that stone. Is it a true story? Let's hope so.

Just across the Square from the Remu Synagogue is the oldest standing synagogue in Poland (called Old Synagogue). During WWII it was desecrated by the Nazis and used as an arsenal. Most of its artwork and relics were stolen. Now, it houses the beautiful *Museum of Jewish History*, displaying liturgical items, ancient Torah scrolls, textiles, dishes, utensils and shofars, as well as photographs, documents and artwork pertaining to the Jewish history of Cracow.

While a few cafes in Kazimierz feature Jewish-style food (such as gefilte fish, cabbage rolls, and borscht) and play Klezmer music, it is a facade because they are operated by Gentiles.

By the 3rd day of our stay in Cracow we had psyched ourselves up to make the visit to AUSCHWITZ and BIRKENAU. How can words describe man's gross inhumanity? How could any human being inflict so much pain and suffering on others and find reasons to justify their actions? How do we explain this to our children and grandchildren?

There were large groups of Israeli high school children proudly holding aloft the Israeli flag - our hope for our Jewish future.

With tears and heavy hearts we recited Kaddish and kindled Yahrzeit Candles at the memorial near the gas chambers of Birkenau.

Very few words were spoken as we drove back to Cracow.

In the late afternoon, two of us, (Bernice & Gord) took a walk to try to clear our heads. We headed to Schindler's factory. Thankfully, there were a few good people like Schindler whose conscience obliged them to help a small number of Jews to survive.

The next day Bernice & Gord took the train to Warsaw and spent the afternoon and evening re-exploring the Ghetto in Warsaw before flying back to Toronto the next morning

We left Poland different than when we arrived.

On reflection, we were told that years ago Poland was called the Paradise for the Jews. When compared to other countries in Europe, Poland was indeed a haven for our people for hundreds of years.

Today, all this is hard to believe.

Shtetl Life: Two Web Sites That Illuminate The Past

David Lederman (Israel) has thoughtfully posted a PowerPoint Slide Show of:
My Small Shtetl (in Yiddish, *Meine Kleine Shtetele*).

Ilex Beller prepared this presentation consisting of 30-40 excellent colored drawings of daily life in the shtetl. The pictures are filled with interesting characters and events and are captioned in Hebrew; it is easy to figure out what's happening even without understanding Hebrew. The slide show is accompanied, by "*Mein Shtetele Belz*", one of the most popular Yiddish songs depicting childhood in Belz (now Beltsi in Bessarabia) and a longing to return to the good old days. If you'd like to view the slide show, e-mail me requesting, "My Small Shtetl" and I'll send it to you: < nstaichman@comcast.net >

Thanks to **Russell Taichman** (USA) who discovered:
http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/MK/MK_images/index.html

They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust

Mayer Kirshenblatt (born 1916) and **Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett** (presumably his daughter) provide rich and vivid depictions of Jewish life in Opatow (Apt) before WWII. There are references to nearby Ivansk. Mayer immigrated to Toronto in 1934 and taught himself to paint when he was 74. A book by Mayer and Barbara is scheduled for publication in 2007...it'll make a wonderful gift!

WE USED TO LIVE SIDE BY SIDE:

Recollections of Older Inhabitants of Iwaniska of the Time When Jewish People Still Lived in Our Town.

by Maria Kargulewicz, Grade I^a, Junior Public High School in Iwaniska
First Place winner of essay contest, 2006

According to historical sources, Jewish people lived in Diaspora since the VI century B.Ch. and their presence in Poland dates back to the XIV century. Since a very long time Jews lived in Iwaniska as well.

What were their lives like among Poles in Iwaniska?

In order to answer that question I paid a visit to Mrs. Marianna Cieszkowska and Mr. Stanislaw Sejmicki. They both remembered those old times. They were little children at that time, and their neighbors were Jewish. Stories that they told me were so powerful, very detailed and exceptional. Despite the advanced age of my interlocutors they provided me with extensive information on the subject.

Living among the Polish inhabitants of Ivansk, the Jews had developed their own culture and their own religious rituals to deal with problems of daily life. They lived by their own rules. Both rich and poor Jews lived in Ivansk. They used to help each other, especially when Shabbat time was approaching. On this day Jews used to pray in the synagogue (called *Boznica* in Polish), and in the afternoon they used to walk through the town with their families.

On this day they did not work, Poles used to replace them in daily activities – says Mrs Cieszkowska. Beginning on Friday afternoon the Jews celebrated Shabbat and were not allowed to even light up a candle. So they used to call on Polish children or adults to assist them. Poles were paid for that – says Mr. Sejmicki. When he was a 7 years old he watched carefully the Jewish rituals. He remembered very well the Jewish wedding: celebration of the marriage wasn't carried out in the synagogue but outside, near the bride's house. Both bride and groom were walking around a pot (a crock). The groom had to break the pot which was supposed to bring happiness in the future. After that the company entered the house and celebrated.

Both Poles and Jews had also sad moments in their lives, like funerals – says Mr. Sejnicky. After someone died people gathered in the house of the deceased for prayers. The body was prepared for the funeral: it was washed for the reason of purification so that he or she could go



“on the other side of the life” with dignity. Afterwards the body was wrapped in white sheets and transported to the cemetery, which was called “kirkut”. The body was buried in a “sitting position.”

Young Jews went to the school with Polish children. The children used to play together, to share bread and sometimes to quarrel – which is quite normal with kids – continues Mrs. Cieszkowska. But they liked each other and gave each other candies because they were friends – adds Mr. Sejmicki.

Neither Mrs. Cieszkowska or Mr. Sejmicki recalled any big arguments between Poles and Jews. People were friendly and willing to help each other. When a Pole could not pay for the food, the Jews would not make any problem and advised to pay later. “Just come!” – Mr. Sejmicki remembers what they were saying to Poles.

The Jewish people in Iwaniska were primarily traders and craftsmen. They ran bakeries and tanneries. Jews were also shoemakers, tailors and doctors. The best tailor was Mr. Grymblat [Greenblatt?] who used to make very elegant suits. Jewish craftsmen were eager to do their job quickly.

“I remember my mom went to the tailor before Christmas with a textile and asked the Jew to make two hats for children. After just 3 hours the caps were ready and brought to our house.” – says Mr. Sejmicki.

Mrs Cieszkowska also remembered that there were three Jewish bakeries in Ivansk. “I only remember one baker’s name: *Brukiew*. When my father was on duty at night, (he was a watchman), he once entered the Jewish bakery to buy a bit of bread although he had little money. It was a very cold night, and my father was very hungry. He remembers that the Jew gave him bread so that he could eat it”.

There also were doctors. They willingly treated Polish patients. One of the doctor’s name was Dr. Glick [Ed: From other accounts “Dr.” Glick was not a physician but a “*feltscher*”, a “barber-surgeon”.]

Jews were trading in horses and other animals. Some were butchers who sold beef. They were not allowed to eat pork however. Instead, they could eat other types of meat provided it was not from the rump.

That was how daily life was in Iwaniska before those horrible days of WW II. In 1939 Ivansk was inhabited by 3,700 people, large majority of them were Jewish. Extermination carried out by Nazis resulted almost in annihilation of the Jewish nation. Some people were shot immediately, like the old woman, Mrs Getsel, who was killed in her bed. I saw it. I was a little girl at that time and with other kids we entered the home after the Germans left; what we saw was terrifying. We dispersed to our places immediately – says Mrs. Cieszkowska.

The Germans hated Jews so much that they could take them away from their houses without any reason and shoot in them in public or lead them to the cemetery and then shoot them there. I still remember this scene: a Jewish woman carrying a baby was led to the cemetery and just shot – says Mr. Stanisław.

Most of the Jews were transported to death camps and concentration camps. Some fled to the nearby forests. The same fate awaited Poles. During the Nazi occupation Poles were helping Jews, especially in the most difficult moments. They would hide Jewish children although one

could have been killed for that. Nazi soldiers used to write on every house "Achtung" (Attention): Hiding Jews may cause death". Nevertheless the Poles were supporting Jews.

As per Mrs. Maria recollections: "I can still remember this Christmas night in 1943. We were about to sit down to have a Christmas dinner when someone knocked on the window. My mom came out and came back immediately: she wrapped up some bread and a cake in a piece of paper and went out again. When she came back her face was so pale. She said: "It was a Jew, the tailor; he used to live in this house in which we are now living; he asked for a piece of bread. My mum took this piece of bread away from her children and gave it to the hungry Jew. She worried so much about us so she asked the Jew to go away quickly as our life was at stake. The Jew was named Lederman – that was his name – he appreciated what she was doing for him. He left but also asked mom to take care of the house. "

Obviously Polish inhabitants were sometimes telling bad things about Jews and vice versa but this can happen even within one nationality. All in all, the relationship between Poles and Jews was friendly; they lived side by side respecting their diversity, which made Poland a special country with a particular flavor and climate.

Nowadays one can hear different opinions about Jews. Why? My guess is people just forgot about the past, common history and years of common culture that once were uniting these two nations. But one cannot just wipe it out from the memory: it's impossible.

Essays are Continued on the Next Page

Canadians help rededicate Jewish cemetery Jews buried sacred scrolls as Nazis advanced

10 November 2006

The National Post, a Canadian newspaper featured a report on the background and purpose of our work in restoring our ancestor's cemetery.

You can access the article on the web:

<http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=5cdc7f77-971f-4371-a2d5-7acb25ea33e8&k=10294>

WE USED TO LIVE SIDE BY SIDE:

Recollections of Older Inhabitants of Iwaniska of the Time When Jewish People Still Lived in Our Town

by **Beata Madej** Grade IIIb, Junior Public High School, Iwaniska

Second Place winner of essay contest, 2006

Jewish history goes back to the Biblical Times. The turmoil in Jewish history resulted from the fact that Jews were deprived of their own country to live in. As a result they had to live in many different countries, like Poland.

The history of Iwansk is very much linked to the history of Jewish people. Thanks to the memories and accounts of the older inhabitants of Iwaniska, we may turn back the clock and see how it really was.

Here is the account of Mr. Henryk Grysinski who is 83 years old.

My recollections of the Jewish people go back to the pre-war times. Iwansk at that time was inhabited by at least 4,000 people, 40% of them were Jewish (some 1,700). As far as I can remember in neighboring villages the Jews were also present: 1,000 of them lived in Bogoria, 4,000 in Klimontow, 1,400 in Korzywnica, 11,000 in Ostrowiec Swietokrzyski and some 1,300 in Cmielow.

In Iwansk the Jews lived in the streets Rakowska, Szeroka, Garncarska, Gesia (today's name is Witosa) and in the Main Square (Rynek) area. Their houses were made of wood and were standing very close to each other. By the late 1930s the standard of the living for Jewish people was rather high. They were traders, craftsmen (I remember the Jewish tannery at Garncarska Street). They would sell / trade at the market in Opatow (Apt) and neighboring villages and towns. They were trading horses, cattle, cereals and feathers.



I remember the Jews used to sell ice cream in the summer although there were no refrigerators at that time. They used to keep ice in the holes in the ground with sawdust. They used to run shops, workshops, bakeries, inns. The relationship between Jews and Poles was good. We were living side by side and we tried to keep good relationships. It was very common for Poles and Jews to have business dealings together. There were problems and conflicts as well, and I

remember some of the Poles were hostile toward Jews but I cannot recall any major issues and arguments.

Although dispersed, the Jewish people were very keen of their culture, tradition and rituals. What was different between Poles and Jews was religion that has been present in a daily life. Jewish men looked different from Poles – they wore beards and *peyes* (side locks). They had their synagogue (that stood once in the place where fire hall is located now). Near *Ivansk* and *Zielonka* there was a Jewish cemetery called “*kirkut*”.

WW II was the most dramatic experience that I still have in my memory. When it broke out, the most tragic fate for the Jewish people began. The Third Reich set a very clear objective: mass extermination of Jews in Europe. Nazis were exterminating Jews in *Ivansk* as well. A Jewish Community [“open ghetto” (1)] was established in *Ivansk*, and Jews from adjacent villages were forced to move to *Ivansk*. The trains coming through *Ivansk* made it possible to transport Jews quickly to the concentration camps (2). A special police guard was established in order to help Germans exterminate Jews. Jews were forced to wear an armband with the Star of David; moreover, they had to mark the door of their houses so that they could be distinguished from Polish houses. Men had to shave their beards and were used as a slave labor force.

I remember the Germans forced Jewish men to sing a humiliating song while working:

*Nasz Hitler złoty, Nauczył Żydów roboty,
A Śmigły-Rydz (3), Nie nauczył nas nic”*

Which meant: “*Hitler the Golden, taught Jews how to work, and Marshall Smigly – Rydz (3) taught us nothing.*”

During occupation life was not easy for the Jews and they were very poor. We couldn't help them.

As a teenage boy I joined the resistance, I was a courier and my nickname was “*Pogon*”. I had to deliver orders and packages. I used to work in a sawmill and I had a special pass so that I could go freely to different places. I could bring food to hiding Jews and sometimes even warn them before the guard arrived. The Jews could not cross the area that had been set up for them. I remember how a German killed a Jew when he was found in the Polish section of town. Isolated like that, the Jews were faced with death and starvation. Some Poles were helping them, although this was forbidden by the Germans who issued special orders against Poles assisting Jews.

I still remember *some Jewish names*: *Giecel*, *Slamka*, *Hhyl*, *Josek*, *Mejlech*, *Srulka*, *Moseki Abram*.

The main German commander in *Ivansk* was a certain *Krügier*, and his deputy was *Schmidt*. They used to ride on their horses through villages looking for hiding Jews. I remember once they found a Jew, tied him up to the horse's neck and started to beat him up. After that the horse pulled him through the road.

Very often the Jews were forced to bribe Germans as their lives were at stake.

On September 1942 there was a great tragedy in *Ivansk*. Nazis set fire to the Jewish houses in the night. A huge fire spread out very quickly. I could hear women and children crying. Mothers with small children were being killed and thrown into the fire. No one was allowed to extinguish

the fire, even the fire brigade that had arrived. Only when the Polish houses were in danger, did the Germans allow the fire brigade to take action. The fire broke out at 11:00 pm and lasted all night. The Jewish synagogue has burned and you could only see ruins in the morning.

On October 15, 1942, at around 2 o'clock in the night, the Germans made a round up that lasted until 7:00 am. All the Jews were made to stand in the main square and were surrounded by Germans: women on one side, men on one side and mothers with children yet on the other side. The Jews had to get rid of all their belongings, like gold and silver. After that they were taken to away to their deaths.

Some Jews managed to escape. Germans looked for them in caves and abandoned houses and once they found them, they took them to the cemetery, made them dig graves for themselves and then shot them.

It was very hard for the Poles to bear all this; so very often, Poles helped Jews even though they were risking their own lives: they gave them food, provided shelter. Even members of close families did not know about this. One of those families was the Moskwas.

Now, 60 years after the WWII, we still are unaware of so many human tragedies and so many human faiths that have been forgotten and fallen into oblivion. Many eyewitnesses of these tragic events are already dead. What has been left instead are memories.

I believe that for the sake of the younger generations that did not face the war we need to reinforce and maintain a dialogue between Jews and Christians. After all we are together children of one God.

1) Ivansker Jews were confined in an "open ghetto"; warning signs and markers rather than a wall or fence marked its boundaries. Jews found outside the ghetto risked severe punishment and death.

2) Mr. Henryk Grysinski's recollection of Jews being deported by railway from Ivansk is not accurate. The people were forced to march to the Cmielow ghetto where they were placed into cattle cars and taken to Treblinka.

3) Marshall Edward Smigly – Rydz (1886 -1941) was a politician and officer in the Polish Army. In 1936 he succeeded Józef Piłsudski as Marshal of Poland and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. He lead the Polish defense when the Germans invaded the country in September, 1939.

WE USED TO LIVE SIDE BY SIDE:

Recollections of Older Inhabitants of Iwaniska of the Time When Jewish People Still Lived in Our Town.

by **Patrycja Rusak** Grade I a, Junior Public High School, Iwaniska

Third Place winner of essay contest, 2006



In the 1920s and 1930s Jews represented the largest minority living in Poland; they lived and worked in our country. They could freely trade and worship; they could also use their own language. A good example of the Polish-Jewish relationship in the countryside can be gleaned by the account of my grandmother. When she was a child she used to live with her family in Stobiec next to the Jewish family.

My grandmother states, "A five person Jewish family lived next to our house: grandparents, parents and their daughter. Their name was Majurki (Mayorek). The part of the village I lived in was called a Goat Market. Living like this side by side our families were pretty close to each other. The Jews used to come to have water from our well. Their daughter's name was Malka. We used to play together. I

remember when her mother was calling her to come back home she used to call, "Malki, where are you?"

"The Mayoreks had a wooden house with two rooms, a kitchen and a hall. They had 3 *morgs* of land, a horse, a cow and a little barn. Zelik Mayorek traded in something but I can't remember now what it was. "

"On Shabbat, which was on Saturday, Jews had to refrain from forbidden activity and were not allowed to do almost anything. Instead, they used to hire a Pole who fed the animals, brought in water and set up the fire. The Jews were only allowed to pray on Shabbat. I know this because my sister and I were looking through their window one day and watched what they were doing. We saw that they wore white vestments tied with tapes as well as the very characteristic caps. "
[Ed: I am not sure this was Shabbat]

"Another holiday of theirs that I remember was called « *kuczki* » (the Polish name for *Soukkot*). The family built a special wooden porch without a roof. Instead the porch was covered with branches of conifers. We could not see through what they were doing and how they were praying there. "

My grandmother also told me that during funerals dead people were buried in a seated position, covered with white sheets. The Jewish cemetery was called a « kirkut » - in Stobiec it was located by the river.

“What happened to the Mayoreks I do not recall. They might have escaped at night or fled to their niece in America.”

“Then the war broke out and everybody knows how it ended. Our house was destroyed by canon shells; so we moved to the Mayoreks’ house and lived there for about a year before we rebuilt our own house. “

I know from my grandmother’s accounts that the current Rakowska Street in Iwaniska was inhabited only by Jewish people. They owned every single shop in the market square except two shops which were run by Poles. In the place where the Fire Hall now stands was a *bóznica* (a Polish dated word for synagogue), a Jewish house of worship.

My grandmother also told me that when she was a child old Polish people tried to scare young children saying that the Jews would kidnap them in order to use their blood for the Jewish holidays. My grandmother didn’t believe it at all as she knew Jews personally. And despite their different religion and different rituals they were simply good and honest people.

Editor’s Notes on the Essays

The essay contest has been a valuable and a meaningful experience. Congratulations to the winners and all those who submitted essays. Congratulations and well done are also extended to the teachers who supported and encouraged their students to explore their town’s past.

Students in the Junior High School know relatively little about the Jewish people who once shared their little town. And we, the Jewish descendents of Ivansk are constantly searching for more information about the world of our ancestors. The essays have opened new portals of understanding to everyone.

The elderly people who were interviewed by the students were only youngsters when Jewish families still strolled through the town on Shabbat. All had fond memories of their lost neighbors and were genuinely distressed when the Jewish community was exterminated by the Nazis. Yes, there were problems between Poles and Jews based on differences in culture, religion, language, economy, and so on. And yes, some Poles did not wish us well. But there was no hint of virulent anti-Semitism or unrelenting tension between Christians and Jews. I am not trying to say that Ivansk was Utopia, but it served as our home for generations and most of our Polish neighbors were honorable, decent people. Jews and Poles were united in their understanding of poverty; both communities worked hard to survive and some barely made it. The so-called “wealthy Jews” in Ivansk were more entrepreneurial, more attuned to the capitalistic means of doing business than the majority of Poles who were still tied to the land. But in reality, they had little more than their Polish neighbors. Perhaps the rich fabric of Jewish culture and tradition (for example the way we celebrated Shabbat and other holidays) may have made it seem that we were blessed with material abundance.

Polish and Jewish children formed close friendships; Polish children were curious about Jewish customs and observed how we kept Shabbat, how we conducted weddings and how we paid homage to our dead. We are told that the deceased were buried in a “sitting position”: I have never heard this before. Can anyone explain how/why this was passed on to Polish children? Most significant, these children witnessed countless acts of sharing and giving among Poles and Jews! It was not always grey, bleak and cold.

We owe the headmistress of the Junior Public High School, Mrs. Ewa Malinos, her faculty and staff a great deal for supporting the establishment of the essay competition. The faculty suggested the title for the essay, evaluated the entries and selected the three winners.

You did a great job! Thank you!

In a future e-Newsletter we’ll report on the essay awards ceremony that was conducted in the school when Ivanskers returned to the shtetl to re-dedicate the Jewish cemetery. I am told that students and teachers extended a wonderful welcome to our people, treated them to a fantastic talent show and impressed everyone with their heart-warming smiles and good humor.

We hope to sponsor future competitions in the school (although not necessarily limited to writing essays). The children of Ivansk are an incredible resource, and we take great pride and pleasure in their accomplishments.

Thanks also go out to Norman Weinberg, the director of the Polish Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project (PJCRP) who came up with and promoted the idea of the essay contest and who has worked tirelessly to encourage Polish-Jewish understanding and reconciliation.

As in so many other aspects of our work, we are deeply indebted to Pawel Skowron and Grzegorz Gregorczyk for translating all the essays into English.

How lucky we are to have such friends! We couldn’t do it without you!

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