

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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Contents

- **Iwaniska Revisited** by **Sidney Freedman**
- **Treblinka Photo Collage**
- **My Trip to Poland. An Unforgettable Experience**
by **Jacob (Koby) Silberstein**
- **AfterWords: e-Mail from Ivanskers Written After Returning from Poland**

[**Editor:** Our coverage of the October pilgrimage to rededicate The Ivansk Jewish Cemetery continues and features two essays:

The first was written by **Sidney Freedman** of Toronto. Sid was born in Ivansk; luckily, his family left Poland before the outbreak of WWII, when he was about 1 year old.

Commenting on the return to his birth place Sid tells us:

"I came away from our common ancestral home burdened with an overwhelming sense of loss, rather than with a sense of rediscovery."

"The Ivansk that we visited was confirmed as a good place to have left."

Sid's powerful and deeply-felt memoir will leave an indelible impression on all who read it. It is a haunting account of the emotional and intellectual burden that all of us share because of our common and sometimes tragic history.

Jacob (Koby) Silberstein is the author of the second essay. A proud *Sabra* (native-born Israeli) Koby made the journey to Poland hoping to learn more about his family roots. Almost everywhere he turned, Koby encountered something from the past. What follows is an amazing story of what he discovered.

Finally, there is a series of short e-letters written by some participants after they had returned home from Poland and had time to reflect on their experiences. The letters are presented in chronological order and in some instances were edited, deleting irrelevant material.

I am grateful to the Ivanskers who sent photographs for possible inclusion in the e-newsletter: Bonnie Aidelman, Sid Freedman, Gary Lipton, Susie Kaplan, Shelly Kesten, Len Monheit, Ethan Rotenberg, Audrey Taichman, Darren Taichman, Lorne (Lazer) Taichman, Marsha Taichman, Susan and Michael Taichman-Robins and Dorothy Wiener.

Iwaniska Revisited

by Sidney Freedman

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

On a windy day and under a cloud-covered sky, I came back to Iwaniska, a town that Mayor Zoltek pointed out was founded some six hundred years ago. I can not imagine how it might have looked in the Middle Ages, but not much could have really changed in those six centuries. The town, our shtetl, at least in its central square area, can be traversed in all of five minutes.

It is said that the Jewish presence in the geographic area, the *Gmina*, was of some four centuries. Undoubtedly, many dwellings, shuls, and *Beit Hamidrashim* succeeded each other as they were built and rebuilt through the years. The old cemetery, lost as to its precise location, was replaced by a new site. It is that restored site that we, a group of progeny, came to rededicate.



Standing across from the town square in Iwaniska

It is not possible to restore in its entirety a cemetery which has been systematically denuded, stripped of the stones that marked the places of those who once were. The villagers, who lined up to appropriate Jewish housing and possessions in 1942, obviously felt that that the “evacuation” was to be the end of the Jewish presence in ancient Iwaniska for all time. If the villagers had believed that Jews were likely to return, they would have hesitated to take advantage of their neighbor’s plight.

There may have been those that thought the “evacuation” was to be only a resettlement process, but by October of 1942, anyone with eyes to see would have discounted the possibility of a Jewish return. Yet there we were, rebuilding the walls and gate and recalling in our memory those who were laid to rest prior to the expulsion and those who were murdered on that infamous day, as prelude to the forced exodus.

And so the Jews of Iwaniska, enduringly separated from their fellow townsfolk, were finally separated bodily as they had separated themselves culturally, linguistically, and ritually for as long as memory had served. They left Iwaniska on that fatal march north through *Opatow* and on to *Cmielow*, where the box cars waited to carry them through a living hell, to be transformed into the smoke and ashes that some still might consider as sacrifice to “*al Kiddush Ha Shem*”. Theirs was not the blood of a heifer sprinkled on the Temple altar, the smoke pleasing to God’s nostrils, but the blood and mangled bodies of those who believed that a righteous God would somehow intervene to save at least the innocent children.

Perhaps some could today be comforted in a prayer written by Etty Hillesum, a Dutch student of philosophy who died at Auschwitz:

“Reality is something one shoulders with all the suffering that goes with it, and with all the difficulties. And as one shoulders them one’s resilience grows stronger.....Oh God, to bear the suffering you have imposed on me and not just the suffering I have chosen for myself.”

I have from time to time revisited this astonishing prayer. In my undimmed anguish, reliving what happened at Treblinka, I can not be comforted in a construct or philosophy that such suffering was ordained by God.

But let me go back to the beginning of our pilgrimage, for that’s what it really was - a last farewell to an irredeemable past. The Yiddish Ivansker culture no longer exists except as a wistful memory in the minds of those of us who remain children of the shtetl world. Even so, the memory of the shtetl is different for those who experienced it directly, than for those who have only a historic, narrated memory of it.

Ours was no “Fiddler on the Roof” experience. My people did not savor memories of the “*Heim*” for they could not wait to extinguish the bitter memory of that place. Ivansk was counterpoint to all the new experiences that they felt would requite the pain of the old world in the new. They wanted to forget the very smell of Ivansk.

Those who had a second-hand experience of shtetl life, or who are second- or third-generation returnees might have indeed longed for the “*Heim*” as the rooted source of their family history. Their historic memory of the shtetl is not the memory of anyone born there or who lived there.

Alfred Döblin wrote of “Berlin Alexanderplatz”: in his case, and for many others like him, the longed for romantic Berlin, his nostalgic “*Heimat*” (home). But Döblin’s Berlin was not the shtetl that informed our sensibilities. In the end of days, Döblin’s “*Heimat*” became *Judenrein*. Today there are more Jews in Berlin than in all of Poland. (Döblin was a Jewish doctor and author who lived near Alexanderplatz).

We mourn the end of a unique Jewish culture that developed over a period of some five hundred years in Eastern Europe. This mourning process, however, this wistful regret, should not extend to romanticize a particular time and place. The Ivansk that we visited was confirmed as a good place to have left.

I put this on the record because the reader should know where I am coming from before continuing this narrative; I came away from our common ancestral home burdened with an overwhelming sense of loss, rather than with a sense of rediscovery.

What did I expect? I don’t really know, except that my feelings had always seemed to fixate on the fact that I had been born in a place fit only to leave! My father had left before I saw my first day. It gave one the feeling of being a little less than legitimate. I had to go back to Poland, the place where I began, in order to sort it out.

We had no sooner landed at Warsaw’s airport, than I felt somewhat uncomfortable. A planeload of Israeli Chassidim had arrived before we did. The earlocks, caftans, beards and black hats attracted curious looks. I almost wanted to warn them to be circumspect, for they were now on Polish soil, a church-suffused land.

Driving from the airport, we had to fight off the attempt of our cab driver to charge us three times the expected fare. We were asked for 150 zlotys, settled for less than 100. On our ride back to the airport when we left, the radio cab sent for by the hotel charged 27 for the same trip!

The hotel staff was exceptionally polite, helpful and welcoming. We three, my wife Dawn, daughter Bonnie and I, resolved to suspend preconceived opinion or prejudice, in trying to be as open and accepting as one could be. I recognized that no matter how hard I tried, what I was to experience would be filtered through the lens of my family's history. Having spent a week in Berlin before coming to Poland, I did not relish the irony that I felt more at home in Germany, the land of our oppressor, than I did now in Poland, the land of my birth.

I was aware that the Polish people, now members of a uniquely monolithic society, comprise today a people whose national identity is totally church centered. In their imagery, the church and state are one! Poles know in their collective hearts that John Paul, on his very own, did-in the Communist empire. The cross had banished the hammer and sickle. In a torrent of Polish emotion, Poles celebrated the homecoming of their national religious hero, their pride basted in a swelling chorus of Catholic affirmation.

"If there is in Poland a national consensus on anything, it is that he (the Pope) was the greatest national figure throughout a thousand years of Polish history, as well as the greatest contribution of Poland itself to world history." (quote from Adam Szostkiewicz, who writes for "Polytica" weekly news magazine)

It is no wonder that cities and towns in Poland have renamed their main streets after the late Pope.

One can not doubt the sincerity of the late Pope in his many demonstrated efforts to reach out to the Jewish nation, as no other Pope in the history of the Catholic Church had done. Yet his love of the Jewish people ("our elder brothers") could only engender in him the pious hope that the Jewish nation would at last find Christ. It is this gift, the very denial of the fundamental insights of Judaism that a loving Pope wished upon us.

Fritz Stern (in his recent book, *"Five Germanies I Have Known"*) tells of a dinner that he attended at the Pope's summer retreat, Castel Grandolfo. In conversation Stern noted that the predominant bright students at MIT were now Asian, and not Jewish. John Paul replied to a stunned Stern - *"Yes, but they [Jews] still control the media and finance."* (I recall an interview with *Oriana Fallaci*¹ who made a similar declaration on television. When the interviewer challenged her statement, she had the decency and good sense to apologize.) If these Papal sentiments come to us from a Pope who loves us, what can we expect from a Pope that does not love us quite as much as did the late John Paul?

Our first excursion, the visit to the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw was a little compromised by the reaction of our guide Maria to a question posed as to the anti-Semitism of Poles. While the question, right from square one, might have been indelicate, her reaction was unhelpful. She was visibly angered, denying that Polish people had anything to regret or apologize for. She termed the killing of returning survivors to *Kielce*² to be abject propaganda. She scolded the questioner for believing in the veracity of an event that has been thoroughly documented and certified.

I was not party to this exchange, nor would I have asked such a question before assessing the guide's knowledge. When I heard about it and witnessed Maria's outrage reflected in her features, I made a mental note to steer around her. I would not, for example, mention the now well-

¹ *Oriana Fallaci* - Fallaci was an anti-fascist partisan in WWII. She was reputed to have been the foremost journalist, author and interviewer in Italy. She died in Florence on September 15, 2006.

² *Kielce Massacre* - On July 4 1946, Poles in the city of Kielce and its environs, inflamed by anti-Semitism and the false belief that Jews had kidnapped a Christian child, stormed a building housing 42 Jewish survivors and murdered all of them.

documented slaughter of the Jewish community by their Polish neighbors in *Jedwabne*³, an event confirmed even by the notorious anti-Semite Cardinal Glemp, he of the Carmelite Auschwitz controversy. During WWII Poles were understandably outraged that the Soviets had pinned the murder of thousands of Polish officers at *Katyn Forest*⁴ on the Germans. The Poles were less exercised when their attempt to blame *Jedwabne* on the Germans was investigated and found to be a massacre perpetrated by Poles. In these circumstances, I determined that I would not raise the issue of 1930s prewar Polish legislation which mirrored the Nazi Nuremberg laws and which were framed to deny Jewish Poles their civil rights.



Maria addresses the group. I am leaning against the fence (wearing sunglasses).

Maria was at pains to inform us that the Vatican had paid to install extensive stone walkways through the cemetery grounds. I wondered why, if that were so, all the dedication inserts embedded in the walkways noted the donors to be primarily American Jews from Texas? I felt as did others that Maria talked down to our group, some of whom had a better knowledge of current Polish history than she evidenced. In later days, we visited the remains of the ghetto wall in Krakow. By then, I had warmed up a bit to our guide, and so tried to be of help. In trying to present a balanced history, I suggested that she tell the group of the *Zegota*.

The *Zegota* was an unofficial Polish agency that was instrumental, at great personal risk to those who administered it, in forging some 60,000 passports, birth certificates and other documents. It was a successful and heroic effort to save as many Jews as they could. The number saved is estimated at 75,000.

The story of the activities of the *Zegota* was a shining, an outstanding example of how some in Poland risked the lives of their families to help save Jewish Poles. I wondered: if our roles had been reversed, how many of us would have risked the lives of our children to save our non-Jewish countrymen? One can never know. Clearly, those that did are to be remembered and celebrated.

Strangely, Maria did not pick up the lead I offered. I assume that she knew little on the subject. Nor did I venture to observe that as many non-Jewish Poles died under the German occupation as did Jewish Poles, some three million in each case.

We left the cemetery. It seemed that all that we could see that would link us to the past would be evidenced in cemeteries! At least some of Warsaw's Jews must have been wealthy. Many of the tomb markers were quite elaborate structures and would have cost a minor fortune, even in the last quarter of the 19th century.

The destruction of old, once vibrant Jewish communities was, in the main, evidenced in the absence of synagogues, the majority of which were not grand as compared to the scale of even minor church buildings. After visiting the only remaining synagogue in Warsaw, I realized that one

³ *Jedwabne* - On June 25 1941, with the urging of the Germans, the town's Jews were rounded up by their Polish neighbours and corralled in the square. The Poles tormented their victims for some hours, then herded them into a barn and burned them alive.

⁴ *Katyn Forest* - In 1940 near the city of Smolensk, on Stalin's orders, the NKDV shot 4,000 Polish prisoners of war and buried them in the forest. Initially blame was placed on the Germans. In all it is believed that the Russians killed some 25,700 Polish prisoners of war at Katyn and at another two sites.

of the constraints in building a synagogue in Eastern Europe had been the fear that a synagogue best not challenge the grandeur of Christian houses of worship. In Warsaw, the old city was rebuilt as it was before WWII, the magnificent cathedrals proudly asserting their supremacy, at what must have been an enormous cost.

I recalled visiting the rebuilt façade, now a “*Potemkin village*”⁵, of the great synagogue on Oranienburgerstrasse in Berlin. This magnificent complex erected in the last decades of the nineteenth century must have posed a challenge to some racist or nationalist Berliners at the time. It is recorded that the building was in the “*Oriental Style*” and that it symbolized a foreign element on German soil. Perhaps the very size of it, akin to the great Christian churches, made some Germans uncomfortable at a time when Germany was aggressively asserting its manifest destiny in Europe.

I could not fathom the Warsaw Ghetto. I could not imagine the waning days of that great multitude of the doomed. I could not picture or accept the evidence of a once major community of Jews slowly being dehumanized, slowly reduced to pitiful rags, waiting only for the end of their degradation in an inevitable and merciless death.

It was the film of emaciated and dying or dead children, lying in their filth, that tore at the heart. It is why I have said that faith itself was murdered at those obscene and unmentionable execution grounds. One looks into the eyes of the dying children on film. They come alive for the moment only to perish once again as the film is rewound. Forgiveness is not in the hands of our generation. It must lie with the souls of those that perished! I can not continue viewing the films. I leave the Jewish Historical Museum in pain.

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Today the *Nozyk Synagogue* is the only functioning shul in Warsaw. What could we learn from this and the fact that there are now, in all, only 450-odd registered Jews (Jews who acknowledge themselves as such) in Warsaw? Nozyk brought back the shuls I had attended in my youth, where everyone *davined* (prayed) in a free-for-all format. I endured the service as I used to endure those that I remembered, at a time and place long gone. Yet there were rejoicing songs from the women’s section, something I had never experienced in the shuls of my youth. It was said that some of the happy singers were converts. There was a troop, a throng of happy Israeli kids at the entrance when we left.



My wife Dawn (right), daughter Bonnie (center) & Mollie Bloomberg (left) at the Nozyk Synagogue.

The monuments erected at *18 Mila Street* are not grand. They do not have the scale and majesty of the grand monument erected to the memory of those who perished in the Polish revolt, an insurgency brutally put down while Russian forces gathered across the Vistula. But think of it! A handful of starved, emaciated and doomed young Jews, sickly and basically unarmed, held off the might of the German forces for some three weeks.

The *Umschlagplatz* is not really a square or a place as such. It was the area sealed off from the city proper to which some thirty thousand Jews at a time were brought. It was from this location that the debilitated remnants from the Ghetto were herded onto the rail cars to be transported to

⁵ *Potemkin village* - in the year 1787, a Russian minister Potemkin, had fake villages built along the Dneiper River, much like Hollywood stage sets, in order to impress the Empress Catherine on her projected tour through the area.

their final destination. As the deportations continued, the ghetto itself slowly emptied of its condemned, shrunken in size as though being constricted by the giant hand of the Nazi monster.

There is a story told of that horrendous deportation. A wagon load of people being driven to the Umschlagsplatz carried some of the old and infirm. A young woman and her seven year old child sat at the rear. The old people begged the driver to let the young woman and her daughter dismount from the wagon before it arrived at the dreaded place. The driver said that he could not because he had a quota to fulfill. He himself would be transported if he were to let anyone go. At a stop almost at the last possible moment for escape, a Gentile Polish woman approached the wagon and volunteered to take the place of the woman and her daughter if the driver would let them go. The driver agreed to the exchange. Did it actually happen? I believe that it did. I believe that there were many such self sacrificial unreported episodes.

The uprising celebrated and attested to by the monuments at 18 Mila Street marked the final moments of the Warsaw Ghetto. When the last Jewish fighter died, the Ghetto now totally in ruin finally fell silent.

It gave me no joy to tour the site of the old Jewish quarter. The rundown apartment blocks, enclosing their depressing courtyards - it was like peering into the bowels of a patient in surgery. The whole area looked desolate and ashamed.

I sought some relief at *Grzybowski Square*. I had heard that the *Kaminsky Yiddish Theatre* in Warsaw was thriving, the Gentile actors perfectly memorizing their Yiddish lines. The theatre was closed but we met three men in the square, at least one of whom was Jewish.

The Jewish man told us that he had been born in Breslau (now Wroclaw). He was an architect, had a gentile wife and several kids, and was doing some building in Warsaw. I asked of his life in the city. He said that the common Polish language was laced with anti-Semitic slurs. He once asked an associate who regularly used such slurs, whether he had ever met a Jew. The man hadn't met a Jew as far as he could recall. Our fellow asked, "What if I told you that I was a Jew?" The associate was at first disbelieving and subsequently apologetic.

We exchanged e-mail addresses. I suggested he investigate opportunities in Canada. He thought that he might do just that, especially if the Kaczynski twins that run the country are re-elected. These worthies are supporters of *Radio Maryja*, the virulent anti-Semitic radio station that should be a profound embarrassment to Poland and is a betrayal of the fight for Polish independence. During the years of Poland's partition between Germany, Austria and Russia, many patriotic Jews had given their lives so that Poland would once again be free. They are now forgotten ghost patriots, who would be strangers in their land, if alive today.

We parted, architect and pilgrims, having shared a brief commonality, a sympathetic brotherhood of hope.

Radio Maryja (*Maria* in English) is a world-wide media conglomerate that in most countries communicates religious messages, designed to enhance and promote the Catholic faith. What started in Poland as a phone-in radio format in the 1990's became a popular venue for political debate. However, *Radio Maryja* differed from those in other countries in that it:

"...became a voice of dissent, fury and anger - often with racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and staunchly nationalist overtones....blamed all major problems resulting from the transition (to capitalism) on a conspiracy of left-wingers, liberals, and Jews, and cosmopolitan-minded corporate capitalists working together behind the scenes to the detriment of our beloved fatherland".

The Polish version of Radio Maryja was founded by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk who has used the station to reverse democratic policies adopted by Poland's government. With the elections of 2005 won by the current centre-right party, Father Rydzyk rushed into the embrace of the governing party.

After the Vatican had had enough of Radio Maryja's racist garbage, masking as the teachings of the Catholic faith, Archbishop Kowalczyk, the papal nuncio to Poland, informed the Polish bishop's conference:

"that Rome was not happy with any media that uses the "Catholic" label to meddle with party politics....There had been some attempts to curb the political ambitions of Rydzyk's media before, but all had failed for one main reason: that in one way or another, many bishops and priests support the redemptionists' policies"

While Poles revere Pope John Paul II, they are not all eager to remember the lessons taught by the late Pope.

"the problem with Radio Marija is that Rydzyk's media consciously play down, suppress or forget his (the Pope's) breakthrough teachings. In this way they play up the mantra of isolationists- in a way that is clearly anti-Christian." (Adam Szostkiewicz.- "Polytica")

The jury is out on the issue of whether the Vatican can clip Radzyk's wings, returning Radio Maryja to its proper function. Prevailing opinion is that it can not.

One night after dinner we met the very impressive Monica Krawczyk. She talked briefly of her work as CEO of "The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland". She seemed to be a bright and overly burdened woman, who was under no illusion about the difficulty of her position and work. She could not announce her corporate presence by a sign posted on her office door! Did the landlord fear vandalism? She did not elaborate, but in her delicate presentation, understated and correct, one could read in her work the fable of Sisyphus who was condemned to eternally push a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll to the bottom each time it neared the top. Monika must have early realized that it would be wise to keep a low, "correct" profile to continue her work.

I asked Monika what present day Poles thought about Jewish Poles. She observed that they had no knowledge of them, and so one assumes that their attitudes in the main are still founded in the "us" and "them" responses that are a product of their cultural identity.

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Treblinka; its very name a curse. *Treblinka*; the final destination to the final solution!

We had left Warsaw, the bus crossing the Vistula, and winding its way north-east to the site. I had feared *Treblinka* the most, the site where I imagined I would have been driven as a fourteen year-old, if we had not left Iwaniska. And so in my mind, I feared an encounter with *Treblinka*; nightmare *Treblinka*, the very fiery furnace to hell itself. I thought that *Treblinka* should be approached cautiously, as one would approach a tarantula, or an anaconda snake, ever alert to its propensity to strike.

I wondered that I could calmly listen to Maria's "*Ladies and Gentlemen*" spiel:

Yes we will come to the parking lot, and we shall stay so long and meet back at the bus etc. Here are the rules: I pay, we walk, and please not to break up the group, but stay together!

I did not want to stay together! Treblinka is, of all things, the special place where it should be forbidden to walk in groups. The masses that were driven from the freight cars stayed together! It was difficult. Our guide of necessity deemed our presence a tour. I deemed it to be a visit to a hallowed ground, each step to be considered and reconsidered as to those who were there but briefly, so many years ago!

I needed to walk in silence and alone, to be privately overwhelmed by the knowledge, by the vision of those that were driven here before our time. Treblinka – where the silence is shattering, unable to override or subdue the screams, the blood-red indelible ink that kept track of each and every deportee. Treblinka – where a million ghostly voices still sigh in the wind, in the branches of the trees that bend in that wind.

The beauty that confronts you at Treblinka is an offence to the senses, as is the indecent sign posted in the parking lot, advertising adjoining sites as desirable business locations! The whole place is a macabre Disneyland set up by Polish authority to welcome tourist visitations. Welcome to what?

Vasily Grossman was a Soviet war correspondent who reported from the front lines during the “Great Patriotic War”. He reported from Stalingrad and followed the Russian advance to Berlin. He was one of the first to enter the ruins at Treblinka at the same time as the Russians entered *Majdanek*⁶. In Treblinka they found some forty survivors, primarily those of the seventy or so who had fled to the forest after the well-documented revolt. I caution anyone who reads his account, to prepare for an eyewitness narrative that would make Dante’s inferno seem a pleasure excursion. (*“A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945 by Anthony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova. Chapter 24. Pantheon, 2006].*

There were about twenty-five SS and one hundred Ukrainian guards at Treblinka. (Grossman was not permitted to label the guards “Ukrainian”. To do so would have been politically unwise.) These one hundred and twenty five managed to torture and to murder 850,000 human beings in a little over a year. The dead were buried in trenches, later exhumed and burned on pyres constructed by the “expert” from Berlin.

If God was present at Treblinka, He must have wept. If He were there, the trees should have withered and never blossomed thereafter. The ground should have been unable to grow vegetation of any kind. The sky should have remained blood red for all eternity, as should the unrequited souls of the murdered who must haunt that site forever.

We had a visitor from Israel before we left home. She told me that, as a teenager, she had visited Poland on the “*March of the Living*”. She went firstly to Auschwitz and then to Treblinka. When she got to Treblinka, she was seized by an encapsulating fear and panic. She knew that she had been there before! In a sense we have all been there before.

But why is the site so beautiful?

Why is the sky so cloudless, so blue?

Why is it a park – an ideal location for a summer camp for kids?

We searched out the shards, the jagged stones spelling out the names of all the destroyed communities. There it was, “*Iwaniska*”! There was Lagow, where my father was born, Klimintow and more - the names of towns where aunts and uncles were born - stones in their thousands as far as the eye could see.

⁶ *Majdanek* - A death camp four kilometers from Lublin.

Some of us lit memorial candles to the dead. Some recited the Kaddish. “*Yiskadal Vyiskadush Shmeh Rabbo*”. I could not praise Hashem in that place. It would have been a sacrilege for me to have done so. But I left a symbolic tear on the Ivansker obelisk. It was a tear for the town, for my family, and for our covenant with God that was not honoured in that place.

I walked among the stones, aware that it is a religious duty for Jews to confront God, to dialogue with Him, to demand answers to impossible questions. I had written a piece on the book of Job, and it now came back to mind. Job’s encounter with God posed the question of why innocents are made to suffer. Yet Job’s ordeal pales beside the murder of the innocents of our time. If God answered and spoke to Job directly, are we now not entitled to demand, at the least, equal time?



A number of boulders have been placed at the entrance to Treblinka. Some are inscribed with the names of countries whence the condemned were taken. One boulder is inscribed in five languages. It reads “*Never Again*”. I had stopped at this boulder, and for one Cassandra moment (Cassandra in Greek mythology was condemned to see the future) I experienced a terrifying vision of days to come. In my imagination it read “*Ever Again*”.

On the way back I stopped at this same boulder, as if I had come to consult an oracle. I reminded myself that Jews are admonished, commanded, never to despair. We are religiously forbidden to do so! We may never abandon hope, without which one can not conceive of a future with confidence in the ultimate redemption of man. Now, before turning away, it seemed that an inner voice spoke to me. It said that one could not, must not, abandon a belief in a moral humanity.

It is natural when confronted with the events of 1942 to be cynical. As Barbara Tuchman observed (in: “*Practicing History: Selected Essays*”. Ballantine Books, 1982) cynicism is a by-product of despair. It is rooted in the feeling that man is out of control, that he can not cope with forces - that envelope him, that bind him and that are beyond his reach. Confronted with the recurring demonic events of the last century, man doubts his moral certainty. He has lost his ethical compass. If he is a feeling man, he is left with a sense of self disgust and with an abiding fear of what may come.

When I turned away from that boulder, I confirmed that it must be “*Never Again*” because, if man can not lift himself up, the world had been created in vain.

I slowly walked back to the bus. I must have been one of the last because Maria was visibly upset with me. She asked whether I thought that I was on a private tour. I didn’t bother to affirm that I was. I simply told her that there were others to follow and that the bus would not leave until all had returned from the site of our immolation.

We rode in silence.

Tall trees lined the highway that led on to Sandomierz. I remembered that even the Israeli kids we had seen in groups at Treblinka were uncharacteristically silent, for they had seemed to be absorbing the story of Treblinka from the ground that they sat upon, from the rocks and from the trees that marked the beginning of the forested area.

For those able to consider it, much information on Treblinka is available on the web at *The Jewish Virtual Library*. There, you will encounter a memoir written by one of the few survivors, Yankel Wiernick. He documented his experience in 1945 in a publication entitled "A Year in Treblinka". The web site presents an excerpt from his story ⁷.

Sandomierz is a handsome medieval city with a long history. The city has been described in one of Michener's books, (if I remember correctly), a novel based on the history of Poland. The Hotel Basztowy was pleasant; the staff obliging, the rooms adequate even if the mattresses were not equal to those at The Westin in Warsaw.

Though Sandomierz was but a stopover on the way in and out of Iwaniska, which has no hotels notwithstanding its 600 year old history, we found it to be an interesting city. Curiously, The Basztowy is located on "Jew Street". We were in or on the fringes of the old Jewish community there. It was incumbent therefore to tour the streets along which Jews had lived; inspect the sites where synagogues may have stood. One could by now ignore the graffiti and the odd swastika scrawled on a building or ruins that Jews once occupied.

We walked the very pretty town square, ate an excellent pizza in a local restaurant, enjoyed the floral display on many a balcony and generally felt a little bit like one had returned to a real community of living happy people. Sadly our emphasis was of necessity focused on the no-longer Jewish presence there. But one could not expect for it to be otherwise, considering the purpose of our stay in Poland.

I was anxious to see Iwaniska, but it seemed for the moment that we were leaving a temporary sanctuary for a place which might test our feelings. I did not in the least feel the encounter with Iwansk to be a homecoming.



Dorothy Wiener & I
at the bus stop in Iwaniska

I had visualized a moment when the bus would stop at the posted sign announcing our arrival. The bus, however, moved past it to the lot set aside for local bus transport. Never mind. There was a sign at the bus depot announcing our town. It was at this sign that I asked that a picture be taken of Dorothy Weiner and me, as being the two Ivanskers actually born here. And so we are there in the picture, now frozen in time - the Ivansker bus stop sign above our heads, my arm around Dorothy's shoulders, smiling for the camera - two prodigal returnees, two cultural survivors, returning to an uncomprehending town.

I had put on a blazer, shirt and tie, dress that I do not normally wear in Toronto. I am not sure exactly why. Perhaps it was the solemnity of the occasion. We were admitted to the junior high school where the students waited, I think with some nervousness, for these guests from another world that somehow had a vague link to theirs. The kids all in costume, performed beautifully, marching up and down the gym to what I took to be a Polish mazurka. Some students sang and after a while they seemed visibly more relaxed, especially when some of us took the floor and danced in turn.

We had funded a contest. The students were to compete in writing about the Jewish community that once lived in their Iwaniska. I found the essays by the three prize winners of interest. The kids,

⁷ < <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Wiernik.html> >

after all, had only a limited number of old people to consult who might yet have memory of the town's Jewish life. It was to be expected that the memories of these elders would be of the harmony that existed between our people and theirs, but one could see that the two cultures perhaps weren't as close as the memories of the elders made them out to be.

The story that Jews buried their dead in a sitting position was curious. The sitting position observation could only confirm the need to think of Jews as being peculiar and different. But since Jews were buried in shrouds, could it be possible that the essays were correct? I tested my ninety-one year old sister's memory. She could not recall Jews being buried in a sitting position. There is however some evidence that such burials did take place. Some believed that a sitting position would enable a quick launch from the grave when the Messiah finally appeared.

I wondered whether we might be able to get the students to write of their impressions of us, and of our need to rebuild a cemetery that no one will visit in years to come. I wondered if we could get honest impressions of our visit from some of the townsfolk. I had tried to read the faces of the kids when we had arrived at the school. They were blank pages.



Dawn and I at the bus stop in Iwaniska

I had studied the map of Iwaniska. I had pondered the almost ninety Jewish families that had lived on or near the town square. We crossed the river, the "*brineh*" (river) that I had heard so much about. I thought I must be mistaken. The four foot wide minor creek, so overgrown that one could hardly see water, could not be the river where my mother washed the front door to our house – where the women came to do their laundry! But no, there it was - the *Koprzyminaka*, a river whose name my mother never knew or had forgotten.

I could not believe the minute size of the central area. How was it possible for so many families to live cheek-by-jowl in such a restricted area? My first thought was to tell our group that we would be back: I was going to the well on the road to Staszow, to scout my birth home. We walked all of one hundred feet, and there was the well!

But where did the others live? There were some two thousand Jews in Ivansk before the war. I believe that they did not live on farms. There did not seem to be any concentration of housing except around the square itself. They must have been spread about: there must have been more streets, more housing than our reconstructed map of Ivansk could show.

The roads are paved now, and my street behind the well has a name- *ul Koscielna*. I don't think it had a name on the day of my birth - my sister could not remember any streets being named. We walked up the street, trying to surmise where our house could have been, "between the well and the *Zhica*" I had been told. But the *Zhica* was a small ravine, not a great valley as I had believed. The townsfolk now have toilets and running water, so they no longer have to do their ablutions behind our house, as they did then, undoubtedly polluting the well water in the process.

The houses that were there when I was an infant are gone. Some of the houses replacing them seemed to be on the verge of disintegration. I did not stay long. An angry dog barked in an enclosure across the street. I walked up the road, a gradual incline, took a picture of the site that might have been that of my birth house, and walked back to the well. I took pictures at the well, and then returned to the group around the square. I had come back to my birth place. It was a place that had no meaning for me.

I had seen pictures of town squares in other villages. I had seen some film showing the massing of carts, horses and cattle in the squares of Polish villages on market days. "Our square" was beautiful. No longer the repository of memory - the memory of market days, the memory of a fateful October day in 1942, when the square stank of fear, when our own Ivanskers were assembled there for the last time.

It was impossible to consider that this beautiful park was now a place of peace, a place where weeping willows and mountain ash grow; where walkways and benches invite residents to take a moment's rest in the most attractive part of the village. There were some men sitting on those benches, conversing among themselves. They were considering our presence there - these people emerging from an enormous bus parked across the way - speculation as to why they had come. What did the visit mean? One man posed a question by sign language. He patted his head indicating the *Kippah* that some of us wore. "Israel?", he asked.

I had noted a sign posted at the municipal offices. It announced a bureau which dealt with issues related to alcoholism. I remembered some songs my father sang in Yiddish and in Polish recalling his days in Ivansk.

I also remembered that my father sang other songs in Polish. They were songs disparaging Jews as a people whom one could not trust. They were said to cheat in business transactions: they were said to be Christ-killers. I did not learn to speak Polish and so can not put them on the record.

A song sung in Yiddish denigrated what Jews considered a Gentile fondness for alcohol. To Jews who must have had the lowest per capita rate of alcoholism in all of Christendom, this seemed a grievous fault. Because I do speak and understand Yiddish, I can but will not repeat the lyrics. In all the stories I had heard of Ivansk it seemed to me that at the time my family lived there, there was little love lost between the two solitudes.

We walked to the cemetery. It was a walk that tapped into deep emotion and memory. It was the Rakover Road, mentioned in the account known as "*The Funeral*". It was the walk that my eldest sister and brother took the day we left Ivansk. They had run to the cemetery to say goodbye to their mother, their young brother, their aunts and uncles. On that fateful day in 1942 it was the last walk for the Jews to the graves of their ancestors whom they soon were slated to join.

I could not for some reason understand what the crowd was doing at the gate and the walls which we had re-erected. I had not understood or had forgotten that the mayor, the priest and other worthies were to take part in the rededication service. They had waited patiently for an hour for us to arrive. Rows of chairs at the front were reserved for the returnees.

I could not gauge the feeling of those stoic faces ranged in the rows behind us. I did not ask myself to gauge which of these, or those related to them in the past, had destroyed our cemetery; which had stolen the thousands of red bricks now rebuilt in stone; which had stolen our gates; which had stolen our tombstones.

There seemed to be a disconnect between them and us, and I thought that there was a disconnect even within the group, within ourselves. The speeches were correct and long. I noted the speech by the priest which translated, in part, spoke of Poles of different beliefs who should tolerate each other with goodwill, in peace, and so on. I don't know how words translate from Polish to English, but I never did like words like "*tolerate*". One tolerates mosquito bites and indigestion. I prefer words like "respect" and "brotherhood". Clearly the priest said all the right things. It was only later,

when we were leaving Ivansk that I noted a sign posted on his church fence promoting Radio Marija.

Our speeches were also correct, if overly long. What struck me forcibly was that our people spoke of “Jews and Poles” as though Jews were not also Poles. Imagine when in Canada speaking of Jews and Canadians! Imagine speaking of Jews and Americans, when our US contingent returned home! It would be a scandal, the source of anguished letters to the editor in all of our dailies. It seemed that we automatically maintained that separation of people into the “us” and “them” configuration, confirming the feeling in both groups of two separate solitudes that comprised their lives prior to 1942, and that extended in their respective minds as we spoke at the cemetery that very day. I got up from my chair when I noticed Monica Krawczyk at the sidelines. I spoke a few words to her and then was asked to be interviewed by local television.

The speeches over, we were left to unveil the monument to our departed Ivanskans. I did say *Kaddish* there. I said it for my near and distant relatives whose bones may well have been interred beneath the monument itself. It is not proper to walk on the graves of the dead. At the cemetery we had no choice but to do so, and so I uttered an apology (*sottissimo voce*) to any and all offended spirits that might have been in the vicinity.

I remembered a story my father had told. A Jew, who perhaps was not as Shomrai Shabbos as he might have been, had died and was to be buried. The grave was dug next to that of a man of extreme piety. A crowd gathered, preventing the interment, and a new appropriate grave was dug while everyone waited. I wondered now as to which spot might have been the *Chusid's*, (very religious person) and whether we were walking on it. I wondered if those who had pronounced the dead man to be lacking in piety were the same as those who denounced others at a later time (and for the same reason) to the German occupiers.

I picked up some small stones at the cemetery. I brought them back to Toronto to place upon the tombstones of my parents. I have not done so because I keep visualizing my parents rejecting them with the comment:

“A gluck hot uns getroffen! Shtainer fun Ivansk - bist du den in gantzen mishuggah?”
(“Boy, we are really in luck! Stones from Ivansk - are you completely crazy?”)

We walked back to the town along the Rakover Road, past the beautiful Russian cemetery, which no one in my family had ever mentioned. It must have been built in the twenties. It was lovingly cared for even though Poles had always hated their Russian overlords through the centuries. I thought that the red brick wall enclosing this cemetery must have been made of the same red bricks that constituted the wall that had originally enclosed ours. Was there a lesson to be learned here? I could not know.

We passed the spot where my uncle *Mosh Chaskel* the boot maker had lived, past the fire hall where the shul once stood, and on across the park square to the city hall. The mayor had pressed a medal into my hand. It had been struck to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the founding of Iwaniska. Having been told that I had been born there, he addressed me in Polish - he seemed genuinely sincere and welcoming. Fortunately, Greg Gregorczyk was at hand so we were able to communicate briefly.



Dorothy Wiener, Ken Rotenberg and I stand before the memorial in the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery. As the senior members of our group we were given the honour of unveiling the monument.

Back at the municipal building, a man approached me. He was the one who as a youth had driven the wagonload of children north on that fateful day, while his father stayed behind to line up for one of the Jewish houses. He asked my age. Seventy-eight I replied. Perhaps we had been at school together, he offered. I had to disappoint him on that issue. I could not help wondering if he often thought about that day – if he ever remembered the faces of the martyred children, if they had ever appeared in his dreams.

We left Iwaniska. I knew that I would not return. I had seen what I had come to see, confirming what I had known all along.

We turned back to Sandomierz along the road to *Klimintov* (Klimontow), the road upon which my father had been robbed, striped naked and left to die. He had often told of that ordeal. He was incapacitated for a year and his partner did die. I looked to see just where in the forests that lined the roadway, a gang of robbers would have hidden. Strangely, my father had never mentioned the ruins of the castle ⁸ that is such a prominent feature on that road. I wondered on that drive as to why my father would have walked for the better part of a day to attend the market square in *Klimintov* in search of a deal on a cow or horse. Now, so many years later traveling that same road by bus, I could sympathize with him and with all those who at the time had to endure such hardship simply to survive.

Years later, my father had driven his dying first wife to Krakow by horse and wagon. It must have taken him the better part of a week! Knowing that the hospital in Krakow was not kosher, he sought out Jewish houses to beg for kosher food, for his wife would eat nothing else. I asked my sister, “Who looked after the kids while he was on his futile mission?” “*I did*”, she replied. At the time, she was nine years old, looking after three brothers aged seven, five, and three.

We stopped in *Klimintov*; not far from the square stood the remains of what must have been an impressive shul. It was built in masonry, unlike the shul in Iwansk which was of wood. The shul was derelict, marked with graffiti and swastikas, boarded up, awaiting funds to restore it. What could it be with North American funding but another museum; a testament to a culture long gone, a source of tourist income. I thought that I had seen enough of cemeteries, destroyed shuls and towns empty of the people we had come back to remember.

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Krakow was not destroyed during the war as was Warsaw. The old city was like a miniature of the old city in Warsaw. The same cathedrals, monuments, commercial businesses lined the formidable square. We had an excellent dinner at Restaurant Czara, walked the square and back to the hotel for an early night. Tomorrow we would go to Auschwitz.

There is a large and infamous cross erected by the nuns of the Carmelite monastery at Auschwitz. The convent is gone but the twenty- four-foot cross is still there, now hidden from the camp side by tall trees. When I saw the cross, erected with sublime insensitivity at that site, I thought that all the crosses in Poland, of which there are millions should properly show just who is suspended in crucified agony. It is not the Christ, but Jesus the Jew, *Yehoshua Hanotzri*, and the Jewish nation that is suspended on that symbol of Christian love. For Jewry it had always been a symbol of the crusades and of the pogrom to come.

What can be said about Auschwitz? My doctor, who was an inmate of Auschwitz, went back to the camp some years ago. On his return, I asked for a comment. What was his reaction to it so many

⁸ *Krzyztopor Castle*- the ruins of a large castle situated on the road from Iwaniska to Klimontow. It is said that the Baron who had built it was also the founder of Iwaniska.

years later? "It isn't as it was", he offered; "It is just a tourist attraction". I recall that another survivor who had returned marveled at seeing groundcover at the site. If there had been grass, he opined, we would have eaten it.

Jarek Mensfelt was an outstanding guide. His knowledge of the place, his demeanor, his calm and correct tone, his understanding of the feelings of the group, were exemplary. He took us first through Auschwitz II (Birkenau). Even though we did not get to all of the camp, including the Buna synthetic fuel plant site (which the Americans had once bombed), one had to wonder at the enormous size of the place. It was monumental, far greater in area than I could have imagined.

What can one say of the experience except to highlight one or two moments? There were two pictures taken by the Germans on display that send a chill through an observer even today. The first shows two German officers standing on the unloading platform, their backs to a stream of women and children on their way to the gas chambers. The soldiers smile, sharing a joke or a witticism.

Another picture shows an inmate behind the wire, silently watching as a line of women and children walk their last steps to the ovens. His look is pitiable. He knows what they do not; his demeanor reflecting lost hope, the victim of a curse that made him a participant in an unending nightmare! There is no hope for the children, and so no hope for mankind.

I asked Jarek if Cardinal Glemp was still a church personality or whether the Vatican had shunted him aside after the Carmelite monastery affair. Jarek said that Glemp was still around but not much heard of. When we got to the end of the tour, I took a picture of what had been the monastery while Jarek told of the controversy. He did not tell of how the Catholic church was, and still is, bent on turning the image of the death camps into a symbol of Christian suffering. He told the story of Rabbi Weiss and his people challenging the location of the monastery at this place of Jewish martyrdom. The monastery building had been the place where *Zyclon-B* gas canisters had been stored. I don't believe, however, that Jarek mentioned the beating inflicted on Rabbi Weiss and his followers as the police stood by, intervening only to arrest the Rabbi and his group for causing a disturbance.

While the monuments at Auschwitz are impressive, the most telling sites are at the women's camp. The horrendous barracks, and the "*shisehouses*", depressing buildings where women befouled themselves. perched on rows of outhouse holes without the benefit of water, soap, paper or any amenity. The guards were loathe to enter because of their fear of typhus.

There was another place, one that would test the imagination. It was the place allocated to women who, too far gone to work, were stored without food or water, awaiting more of their number to arrive in order to conserve on *Zyclon-B*.

I did want to get one special picture. It was of the gallows where Rudolf Höss, the commandant, was hung.

My wife Dawn asked Yarek what impression he thought that visiting schoolchildren might take away. Would it inform their lives? His answer was an elegant shrug of the shoulders.

We returned to Krakow to tour Kazimierz, the ancient Jewish district. We dutifully viewed the now closed synagogues. We walked the squares where Jews had lived and prayed for so many centuries. It grew dark; the group was tired, and so we left off lamenting the past and the destruction of another ancient Jewish community. For me, it was more than enough. I would visit no more at the ghostly sites, the sad remains of a people and a culture that is no more.

The next morning on the last day of our trip, our bus was to leave on a lengthy run back to Iwaniska. It would be to commemorate the anniversary of the day that our people were driven from Ivansk. I could not stomach it, and so we three missed the return trip to the cemetery in Ivansk, and the later stop at Cmielow, where the box cars had waited. It must have been a silent ride back to Warsaw.

We made our farewells to our fellow travelers that Thursday night with a sense that we had shared in a week of experiences that would take some time to sort out, to resonate in the mind's eye, and in the senses. I thought to take a little time to digest it all, to recover my thoughts and to decide upon just what it was that I had come away with.

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These last weeks since our return home have been difficult. One can not easily put the flavor of the death camps out of one's consciousness. The images, the sense of a culture irredeemably lost, permeate your thoughts. They intrude on your daily routine. They haunt your dreams.

I think of the monumental tragedy that was the twentieth century. Over one hundred and fifty million people met a violent end during those years, the bloodiest in the history of mankind. Some five million non-combatants who were not Jews, were victim to the Nazi sickness, making a total of 11,000,000 who died in the camps or were butchered in diverse places. In all, some fifty million perished from 1939 to 1945. How are we to understand what this means to our generation and to generations that follow?

Though so many died, the ultimate loss was to the idea and ideal of progress, the ideal of the betterment of mankind through education and through science. This 19th century ideal was betrayed by the most educated, the most scientifically advanced nation on earth. They used their expertise to create the very first and only industrialized genocide. They built factories to process live people into ashes!

Niall Ferguson has written "*The War of the World*" (Penguin, 2006), a book which ponders the descent of the West, as evidenced in that terrible century. Ferguson discusses the Holocaust:

"It stands without parallel as the most wicked act in history. Other regimes had perpetrated mass murder Yet there was something qualitatively different about the Nazis' war against the Jews and other unfortunate minorities they considered to be "unworthy of life". It was the fact that it was carried out by such well-educated people...perpetrated under the leadership of a man who had come to power by primarily democratic means. The Nazi death machine worked economically, scientifically and euphemistically It was very modern".

"We must study the 20th century, because in different ways it could all happen again: We shall avoid another century of conflict only if we understand the forces that caused the last one—the dark forces that conjure up ethnic conflict and imperial rivalry out of economic crises, and in doing so negate our common humanity. They are forces that stir within us still".

But how did this profound Jew-hatred originate? How is it that even a country such as Poland, where Jews no longer reside, has within its core belief system, within its essential identity, an ingrained abhorrence of Jews?

At the Warsaw cemetery and at other sites our guide Maria kept referring to "The Jews". I found this repeated phrasing to be offensive and annoying. I thought of why this should have been so.

On my return to Toronto, I remembered that the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John repeatedly use that phrase to separate Jews as the quintessential class of evildoers, who are the

role model prototype bad guys. By contrast, Jesus and his disciples play the role of the good guys. We have long been high jacked into their passion plays to role-play the villain portrayed, for example, as “children of (their) father the devil” [John 8;44]. Phrases such as these, originally politically motivated, became part of Christian Holy Scripture.

While our being cast into that role gave meaning to the nascent birth of Christianity, it has been a historic disaster for Judaism. It is an unresolved issue for a Christianity which, in professing its love for mankind, still retains in its root sources a most abiding antagonism and hatred of Jewish people.

Think of it! Just who were these Jews that the Gospel of Matthew [27:26] says demanded the crucifixion of Jesus, with the outrageous wounding and slanderous words, “his blood be on us and on our children”? Jerusalem at the time was a small town. Certainly not all the Jews in Jerusalem could have been at the purported event. Most Jews, of whom there were millions, did not live in the Holy Land but were scattered throughout Mediterranean-based communities. They could not have been aware of the events narrated in “gospelic” accounts, let alone have participated in them.

But there it is repeatedly in the four Gospels. The Jews! The Jews! But there were other Jews at the crucifixion than the ones cited by the Gospels. They were Jesus the Jew and his followers. The only non-Jews present were the Romans! In “gospelic” accounts, Pontius Pilate, who crucified Jews by the thousands without a thought, becomes the good guy who turns his imperial power over to a mob of wild men eager to crucify one of their own. What a remarkable piece of marketing! By sleight of hand, a Jew crucified by Romans is transformed into a Christian God, murdered by Jews!

But is this simply a matter of competing theologies? Listen to the words of James Carroll, sometime priest who chronicled an almost two thousand year slander of the Jewish religion in his book “*Constantine’s Sword*”. I quote from his recent book, “*Crusade: Chronicles of an Unjust War*” (Metropolitan Books, 2004).

“I bring...the experience of the challenge posed to the Christian conscience of the history of church anti-Semitism. Momentous as that challenge has been—a nearly two thousand- year –long arc of Christian contempt for Jews, without which the Holocaust would not have happened”.

“Two features of anti-Semitic thinking come into play...The first might be called the celebration of the “ideal Jew” which accomplishes a denigration by means of an exaltation. Jews as they exist are measured against Jews as they should exist, and are always found wanting. This can involve a New Testament assumption that God’s chosen people should have recognized Jesus as the Messiah; a medieval Christian rage against the Talmud as denial of the sufficiency for Jews of the Old Testament; an Enlightenment –era resentment against Jewish “clannishness”....In every case, the imagined Jew is used to justify contempt for the real Jew.”

“The antagonism between Christianity and Judaism has been intrinsic to the relationship in a way that antagonisms to Islam are not. It wasn’t just that the church “superseded” Judaism... but that the church defined itself in positive terms against the negative of Jews and Jewish religion. This ontological structure of mind is reflected in Christian Scriptures (New versus Old Testament), in Christology (Jesus the New Temple), in theology (Jews as degraded witnesses). These are hints of the foundational Christian traditions that cried out to be corrected after recognitions tied to the Holocaust.”

Those who read “gospelic” accounts as history, as do the Mel Gibsons of this world, are left with the fear that a people who had the power to kill the son of God are not only inherently evil, but retain a supernatural capacity to threaten Christianity itself.

Within a society where religion and the state are one, a society that can not in the main distinguish myth from fact, a society that teaches “gospelic” accounts as factual history, how can anyone expect Poles to question the nonsensical belief that a few Jews who live in Poland are willing and able to subvert the fatherland?

Can anyone imagine that the church in Poland has even the slightest inkling of its complicity in the Holocaust? When they describe people as less than human, when a denial of Jewish blood is a mandatory exercise to elective office, when the daily language is inclusive of anti-Semitic slanders, can Jews feel at home in Poland?

In an interview David Blumenfeld, who had filmed the rebuilding of our cemetery, asked me why it may be that Jews have an antipathy to Poles and Poland when they seem to be reconciled to Germans and Germany. I gave him a view that almost immediately seemed lacking. There are many Jews who would not set foot in Germany even by accident, if it were avoidable.

For those like me who have resolved to abandon hatred and have spent significant time in Germany, it became apparent that one had to deal with people on an individual basis. If we wish an understanding of what those terrible events were about, we can not afford to hate as we were and are hated.

I believe that Jews who are comfortable in Germany, (some 100,000 live there now) are responding to a country that has admitted its past in a sincere effort motivated by the young generations, to lament what happened. How enduring and sincere this is will always be open to question; but we Jews and Germans are bound in an unique and forever historic embrace. The rest of the world should understand this, if it wishes to avoid the horrors of the 20th century in years to come.

The tragedy of the death camps belongs not only to Jews: the calamity is owned by humanity. Sensitive Jews lament the destruction of all the murdered and broken victims of a world gone mad. The psychic wound still lingers: it clings to the murderers as well. It remains an unhealed injury to all, even to those who merely witnessed or permitted “Auschwitz” to happen. It has left us with a loss of innocence. It is a continuing blight on our common hope. It is a recurring nightmare for a damned humanity that has not been able to curb its sick and ferocious other self.

I do not denigrate individual Poles, nor do I have antipathy for the Polish nation. We, individual families, lived together and we died together. Perhaps someday, when the Polish nation has had a number of generations experiencing security, they will be able to shuck off an identity which is so paranoid and exclusive of others. Jews, the perennial “other” in Christian thinking, will not return to Poland. This will be of comfort to many Polish anti-Semites but, some day, Poles may want to recall the long history of the Jewish contribution to Polish society. It may be a fanciful hope, but some day, centuries on, it may be possible to think of Poles celebrating Jewish survival with the cry, “***Am Yisroel Chai***”, ***the people Israel lives!***

At the moment, I think that Poland, on any Jewish issue, is reflected in Spielberg’s experience as he filmed “*Schindler’s List*”. He reported two encounters - one with a man who regretted that Hitler had not killed all Jews, the other who hoped that Jews would return to Poland because the land was not the same without them.

I believe that it was right to rebuild what we could of the Ivansker cemetery, even though few will be back to visit. We owed it to ourselves and to the memory of the generations who lived there. I regret that I was not entirely successful in setting aside negative feelings of Poland. I retain the image of a country fit to leave.

My daughter Bonnie feels that we should not have rebuilt the cemetery. She thinks it an outrage that we paid the people who destroyed the cemetery to rebuild it. She thinks that Poland does not deserve its Jews. She would have used the money to assist needy Jews wishing to leave. In her view, the missing tombstones speak of the Iwaniska that is.

I believe that there are people of good will and empathy among the people of Iwaniska, just as there are those who, like the firemen, blocked all the exits from the town permitting no escape, or those who turned in their neighbor for a litre of vodka. These types should have considered that had the Hitlerites won, they most certainly would have been next.

Perhaps, with time, my feeling of having been not quite legitimate, not quite acceptable, through having been born in Ivansk, will soften and fade. The Ivansk that we visited was not the Ivansk of my birth.

Though the shtetl culture is no more, as symbolic requiem for that culture, I retain a vision of the old Ivansk. It is a vision of Jews honouring the Sabbath, walking a long walk to the shul, talaisim (prayer shawls) draped over the men's shoulders, the children in their Shabbos best.

The shul had been built of wood, plastered over. There was a stone out front which was said to have come from Jerusalem. Inside, mounted close to the ceiling hung a stylized fish which was said to hold up the world. The fish was victim to the fire that engulfed the shul, but the world did not fall: it still spins on its axis while the Sabbath walks to the shul are distant and fading, sepia-coloured memories.

In my imagination and in present reality the flavor of a Jewish presence in Ivansk is gone. But I wonder what could have become of the *Sheydim* (ghosts, spirits). In my memoir of the town, published earlier, (see: *The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, No 12, 2005*) I spoke of these malevolent spirits. They were the souls of the departed who haunted the pews of the shul after dark. They haunted the cemetery and the dark corners of the unpaved roads. These spirits, so vivid in the stories of the shtetl, were real to the Ivanskers of my father's time. In later years, I was not permitted to whistle in my father's presence, because the sound could summon the *Sheydim* to do their worst.

Where are those spirits now?

They can not find a marker to those interred at the cemetery, for all the tombstones are gone.

Do they hover round the fire hall, where the shul and the Beis Hamedrish once stood?

Do they yet hover round the cemetery, as hornets hover around a destroyed nest?

Do they know the way to Treblinka?

Someday these spirits too will be gone. They will fade and disappear when they run out of steam, when they realize that there are no souls left to haunt.

In my mind's eye, I stand at the cemetery alone. I stand, head bowed and in silence, for silence can be the only response to our line cut short in one violent and cataclysmic end.

TREBLINKA



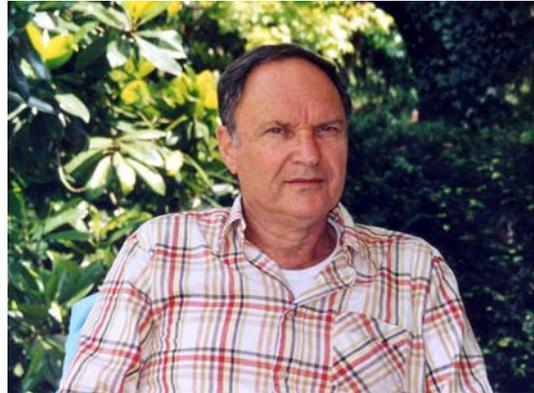
My Trip to Poland. An Unforgettable Experience.

by Jacob (Koby) Silberstein

Kibbutz Magal, Israel

Back in February 2004 my neighbor announced that she was organizing a “roots trip” to Poland and asked if I would be interested in joining the group. What a question! I can remember what my parents, uncle and aunt used to say, “Go back to Poland?” “We don’t want to see the faces of those anti-Semites!” Poland was probably the last place on earth that I would ever want to visit.

But somehow a seed was planted. I began to think about my roots. Like so many other Israelis my family emigrated from Poland (my father was born in Ivansk and my mother in Warsaw); yet I knew very little about their lives before they made *Aliyah* and settled in Israel. My parents and other family members rarely talked about their childhood or their adolescent years; it was like their past never existed. I began thinking and wondering how I could find the pieces to my family’s history.



I started by trying to contact Ivanskers who were friends of my parents. Unfortunately, only a few were still alive. I spoke with two Ivanskers, Mrs. Shoshanah Drielinger (she was called Raizel Vatman in Ivansk) and Mr. Tzvi Weissdorf. Mrs. Drielinger was able to tell me a bit about my father and the shtetl. Tzvi Weissdorf was my father’s good friend, and he recalled many stories about him and daily life and gossip in Ivansk (see: “*Memories of My Youth*” by Tzvi Weissdorf in: *The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter #13, July-August 2005*).

I also started searching the internet; it did not take long to realize that this would require expertise and a great amount of time that I did not have. But the internet provided an important clue: I came across the Jewish Genealogy web site and there I found the Ivansk shtetl link which led me to The Ivansk Project. I contacted Norton Taichman and began receiving The Project’s e-Newsletters.

That was the beginning of a serious desire to learn more about Ivansk. I looked forward to reading stories about Jewish life in the town and even got involved in interviewing former Ivanskers who now live in Israel. I also kept in touch with what was happening to restore the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery. At the same time, I began to dig deeper into my family memories and even found a collection of family photographs taken in Ivansk (some of these were published in *The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, Issue No 6, August 2004. Special Supplement*). Gradually, it dawned on me that I’d have to go to Poland and see Ivansk for myself to really appreciate my family’s history.

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October 2006:

I am off to Poland to join the Ivansk trip to rededicate the shtetl’s Jewish cemetery. I have been watching the weather forecasts on the web warning of cold weather in Poland. So of course I am overloaded with luggage and heavy winter clothing. I arrive in Warsaw and am amazed that it is warm and very comfortable. Thank you for the accurate weather reports!

As soon as I arrive at the hotel and before I can even catch my breath, I bump into Gary Lipton, "Put your suitcase in your room. In two minutes we are leaving for a short walk in town," he declares. And I rush to join the group on its way to the Nozyk Synagogue.

We arrive at the Nozyk and as we stood outside at the back of the building, I am amazed to see a street sign which reads, *Twarda str. #6*. I can't believe where we are: my mother's family lived just across the street at # 5!! I look around but cannot find #5 and am very disappointed. But just a few moments later we came across a house that fits exactly my mother's description of her childhood home. Here I am in Warsaw for only a couple of hours and already I am standing in the same spot where my family once lived and looking at a house that resembled their home.

That was the first of several overwhelming experiences I was to have during the next few days.



Of course there were many sombre moments; Treblinka was one of them. As I walked among the maze of stones with the names of the communities where Jews once lived, I felt my body trembling. My ancestors (from both sides) were taken and slaughtered here! How could this happen? How could human beings do this to each other? How???

That night we drove south to Sandomierz and left the hotel early in the morning on our way to Iwaniska. The mood on the bus was quite high. All of us were anxious to reach the shtetl. And then out of nowhere the road sign of Iwaniska appeared; a feeling of excitement and anticipation filled the bus! Unfortunately, we could not spare the time to take pictures – what a pity.



One of the highlights of the day was our visit to the junior high school. As we walked up to the school we could see kids looking out the windows watching us with great curiosity. Some were waving hello and that made us feel welcome. We were lead into the gymnasium where a grand performance was given to us. The students were dressed in impressive costumes. Is it Purim, I wondered? The girls and boys marched royally around the room to the melody of a grand Polonaise. Then, a choir began to sing Israeli folk songs that had been translated into Polish. And many of our group spontaneously got up and began to dance the Hora. It was an elating and wonderful sight!



The big moment for the pupils arrived with the presentation of the "We Used to Live Side By Side" essay contest awards. Three girls were the winners. They spoke with their grandparents and older citizens to find out about the Jews who once

lived in their town. They learned a lot about our ancestors and about the terrible events that lead to the disappearance of their former friends and neighbors.

We left the school with strong positive feelings; it was an unforgettable welcome.

We gathered in the town hall for lunch and listened to Yitzchak Goldstein's memorable description of "*The Funeral*" which was emotionally read by Mrs. Ellen Monheit. [see: "*The Funeral*" in *The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter #3, March-April 2004*). Yitzchak Goldstein described what happened in the town on 13 October 1942 when the Jews buried their Torahs in the cemetery; the next day the deportation to Treblinka began. There was deep silence in the room, and many of us had tears in our eyes and some even wept thinking about that terrible time.

As we finished lunch we had time to walk around the center of the town. Although the town had been almost destroyed during the war, I still had the feeling that I was back in the shtetl. I could imagine our ancestors working and trading in the shops around the market square; I could see them strolling in their best clothes on Shabbat and other holidays; and I could even hear the children playing games in the street. But this was not my home: my home is in another country, Israel where most of our nation should live.

Then it was time to leave for the cemetery. In solidarity with our ancestors, we walked to the cemetery. But this time we were not following a funeral cortège; we were going to honor our ancestors and to rededicate their cemetery; our heads were not bowed but held high.

Things must have looked a lot different before WWII. We started out on the Road to Rakow passing the place where the shul once stood. In our ancestor's time the road was not paved, and at this time of year it probably was already a trail of thick mud. Now it is paved and carries heavy trucks and farm traffic. Then, we turned onto the dirt road leading to the cemetery; the path was probably almost impassable back then, but it has been upgraded recently and was solid beneath our feet.

The restored cemetery lived up to my expectations. The field had been cleared of trees and wild grasses, and remnants of several tombstones were placed in the reconstructed walls, reminding us what was in this place. The memorial tablets at the gate and on the obelisk told us why we were here.

With the *Kaddish* prayer I felt that a circle had been closed. I had the opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah that no one in my family could have done before. In this beautiful setting the restored cemetery was once again a fitting place for our ancestors, may they rest in peace, *Zechronam Levracha*.

We returned that night to Sandomierz and the next day the bus took us to Krakow. There, I left the tour and took the train back to Warsaw. I wanted to continue my search to learn more about my mother's family that once lived in the capital.

Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk kindly introduced me to Miss Anna Witkowska, a medical student who volunteered to show me the ghetto area, where we spent a few interesting hours. Then, I went to the Jewish Historical Institute where Mrs. Anna Przybyszewska-Droza, an expert in genealogy, searched through archives and photographs and uncovered information about my family before the war. Mrs. Przybyszewska-Droza opened many doors for me and now I can undertake new avenues of research to learn more.

The next day I went to the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw to try to find any graves of the family. I entered the cemetery and quickly realized how big it was; it would be a miracle if I could find anything. Luckily, I was able to meet the man in charge of the cemetery. He told me that there are about 150,000 gravestones in the cemetery; about 40,000 were registered in his computer. If I was lucky, one or more of my ancestors would be on the list. I told him the name of my grandfather and

waited anxiously as he browsed through the records. And what do you think? Sure enough, my grandfather and his father, *Zechronam Levracha* were on the list, buried next to each other! I was told the dates of their deaths, and I was here on the second day of my grandfather's *Yahrzeit*. What a coincidence!



These are the graves of my maternal grandfather, **Yacov Tredler** (died 1922) and my great grandfather, **Benjamin Tzvi Tredler**, (son of Laib; died 1893). Their matzevot are barely legible. In the photo on the left, my great grandfather's matzevah stands on the left and my grandfather's stone is on the right. The photo on the right is a close up of the inscription on my grandfather's matzevah.

Then, the official kindly took me to my grandparents' graves. I light a memorial candle. Before leaving Israel I had gathered 3 stones from my garden and took them with me: I placed one on my grandfather's matzevah; another on the memorial in Treblinka and another on the obelisk in the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery. I stood for a long time next to my grandfathers' gravestones. I could not believe where I was. Slowly I walked around and around the area. It was very hard for me to leave this place.

That night I flew back home. The memory of the journey back to my roots will be with me forever. I even hope to be return again in Poland in the future.

I want to thank everyone who made the trip so successful. Thanks to Ewa our tour coordinator and our faithful tour guide, Maria. Thanks to Norton who pushed us into this experience, and thanks to my new, dear friend Greg who opened so many doors for us.

Thank you all for such an unforgettable life experience!

AfterWords: e-Mail from Ivanskers Written After Returning from their Trip to Poland

From: David Blumenfeld

Sent: Saturday, October 28, 2006 12:16 PM
Subject: Ivansk Report

Norton,

Back in Israel after quite a week. I look forward to hanging out with you in Ivansk soon!

Melissa was very moved by the trip and the kid's really outdid themselves. They behaved well and I think it was nice having some little ones to bring everyone "up" on those difficult days. Melissa stayed back in Warsaw on the Treblinka day, while I filmed the group walking through the memorial camp, and I stayed back in Krakow on the Auschwitz day, which gave me some nice bonding time with them.

I did some nice interviews with Dorothy Weiner and Sid Freedman, our born-in-Ivanskers and captured their thoughts, memories, stories and feelings about the whole thing, and covered Treblinka, the cemetery ceremony, etc... So much footage for a one-hour piece! I had put together a 22 minute trailer of the film which I showed to the group. If possible, I will put it online soon. [see: < <http://www.blumenfeld.com/withinthesewalls/> >].

David

From: Susie Kaplan

Sent: Monday, October 30, 2006 2:34 PM
Subject: Thank you so much

Dear Norton,

I'm not quite sure what I should write to you. All the feelings that I am feeling are new. We had to go to a wedding in New Jersey on the way home so I have had some time to think about what just happened. I wrote in my diary each day so I could relive each minute. I cried a river and laughed and formed such wonderful bonds with such special people.

Tears swell in my eyes every time I talk about what just happened and I wouldn't have traded that for the world. It will take a few days to sort out all my feelings and when I do, I'll rewrite my diary and send it to you. I took 298 pictures, not one of which I would erase, each has such meaning and the strange thing is, is that I can remember what each one is.



Sisters:
Evy Eisenberg (L)
& Susie Kaplan (R)

I showed the pictures of my father's house to my Uncle Henry [Yechiel Eisenberg; see his memoir in: The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter #16, Jan-Feb 2006]; I didn't know how he would take it, but surprisingly he was interested but not emotional at all. My cousins on the other hand looked at every picture as if it were the only one that I had taken. I have such wonderful memories; we all didn't want the trip to end. I told my husband that he really missed out on the best adventure that he could have had.

Susie Kaplan

From: Evy Eisenberg

Sent: Wednesday, November 01, 2006 11:51 PM
Subject: To All the Ivanskers

Well my sister Susie and I are back in Toronto after spending the weekend at my cousin's daughter's wedding in New Jersey. Our flight home was uneventful except that we got delayed leaving Newark because of all the wind in Toronto and New Jersey. Went back to work Monday morning and have been feeling really jet lagged.

I left the notebook that I had been keeping; so hopefully somehow they'll courier it to Toronto. I really miss the days that we spent on the bus and touring together. It was the kind of trip that I've never experienced before and I'll never forget it. I know it will take me a while to think through all my experiences and things I saw first hand especially Auschwitz and Treblinka. They are daunting sights that I can't get over seeing. I'll keep in touch soon.

Evvy

From: Susie Kaplan

Sent: Thursday, November 02, 2006 7:23 AM

Subject: My Thoughts

Dear Ivanskers,

I thought I would write down my feelings about this wonder adventure that I've experienced.

When I first got the information about this trip, I wasn't completely interested, I had booked to go on a Florida vacation and a New York wedding and I was excited about that. Then Evvy, my sister convinced me to go, it would be a trip to remember, and I thought about it and cancelled all my other reservations and told her I would join her. I think that was the second best thing that I have done in my life.

When the plane's wheels touched Polish soil, I started to cry uncontrollably. How different from the first time that we landed in Israel when I cried for joy and now I was landed in a place where all my relatives were murdered. It was a very hard moment thinking about these two events.

We arrived in Poland the morning after the group; when we went down for breakfast, we could pick a few people out of the crowd and asked if they were on the Ivansker trip. So, slowly we got to know everyone. I never would have imagined that we would become so close.

All the places that we were taken meant so much to us. All the museums, cemeteries, monuments, towns, synagogues, death camps left a lasting impression on me but the highlight of the trip was the return back "home". When we entered Iwaniska and saw the school children performing for us, I couldn't help but think that my father may have known their great grandparents. And they looked so happy to see us! And we danced together! Where could we ever experience these feelings again?



Susie & Evvy:
Their father's home once stood
on the slope behind them.

After the school trip, we roamed around Ivansk to find our homes. Norton told me that you would have to be blindfolded not to find your father's house. So we took the map, had to move it around in different directions and THERE IT WAS! What a feeling to be standing on the land that my father and his family stood on. Evvy and I sat on the well across the street. And me being the one with all the self control (ha, ha) started crying and crying and then Evvy was crying and we were both crying, the tears streaming like a river down our cheeks. Then, I blurted out, my gosh, all this emotion.

We met a man in the town square and with the help of Greg Gregorczyk, my sister asked him if he knew the Eisenberg family. He said "Nuta Eisenberg?" (who was my grandfather). We were shocked! And then she asked him what Nuta did for a living and he replied that he was a horse trader. Well, again the rivers flowed.

All ethnic culture was wiped out of Poland. There are no Black people, no Arabs, no Chinese and no Jews. As we were told in one of our lectures, something strange is happening in Poland today; there is a Jewish revival without Jews. We heard Klezmer music played by Poles; we heard 'Fiddler on the Roof' playing in stores; we saw many magnificent synagogues, but we didn't see any Jews in the streets. Only Poles live in Poland. How ironic to see all these beautiful structures and not see any of our people there.

I had a trip to remember for the rest of my life. I don't think I would go back to this country. It was hard to see memorials about what happened here. But I have many stories and pictures to share with my children. It was a very significant journey and I thank Norton and Gary and Lisa and Greg for all their hard work. It is very, very much appreciated.

Susie Kaplan

From: Bonny Aidelman

Sent: Thursday, November 02, 2006 11:43 AM

Subject: Re: welcome home

Nissi

When family and friends ask me what impressions I came away from Poland with, I say that "it's a dead country". My maternal grandmother, born Rifka Ruchel Schwartzman, lost three married siblings, two brothers and a sister, perhaps her parents as well, and I'm not sure how many nieces and nephews in the Holocaust. Nothing can make that up to me and my family. Everyone tramples on the bones of our beloved ancestors just by walking down the streets and on the soil of Poland can be found bone fragments. (Ask Sonny Monheit.) I will never know my Schwartzman family. We will never visit one another. All my feelings about Poland are colored by these facts and I make no excuses for my strong negative feelings. I feel sorry for the emotional struggles of our dear Polish friends.



Bonnie Aidelman (L)
& Hvla Scherer (R)

On my flight to Poland, a Pole who has lived in the US for many years, insisted on speaking to me throughout the entire flight. John N., a name he said is as common as the English name, "John Smith", pulled his ears up and asked me if I thought he looked like a Jew....."I know how to make money. I must have some Jewish blood. Is it true that Jews make love through a hole in a sheet?" What a beginning to my trip!

My grandparents, my mother and her sister, lived on Krochmalna Street, which turned out to be just one block away from our 5-star Warsaw Westin Hotel. I don't know the number of the building where my family lived, but there was nothing left to touch of the times my family lived there. Everything has been rebuilt on Krochmalna Street, except for one building on the corner of Krochmalna and Zelazna which has a cornerstone indicating it was built in 1911. All four blocks of Krochmalna are within the borders of the Ghetto. If my grandfather hadn't left Poland before the Nazis came I most certainly would not be here writing this letter.

In Krakow, the Poles have a street equivalent to Jurassic Park where several current or former synagogues are located and where almost all the businesses have Jewish names. In this case Jews are the dinosaurs. Are these businesses capitalizing on "an extinct race" or are the owners really sentimental? At first I thought we really can not know the answer to that question, but then I think we already do.

I'm on a "seesaw" and continue to read about Poland and Jews, pre- and post-Holocaust, as I always have, and I've learned that "politics in Poland remains vulnerable to nationalist extremism, intolerance and anti-semitism".

When I returned home, I learned about a special report published in September 2006 by the Anti-Defamation League entitled, "*Poland: Democracy and the Challenge of Extremism*". The ADL emailed me a copy and I sent the link to the Ivanskers. It's a good thing, I think, that I hadn't read this report before I left for Poland. It says, in part:

"A key pillar of support for the coalition government has been the anti-Semitic Catholic radio station, Radio Maryja..... which commands an audience of up to 3 million people, and also runs a TV station and a daily newspaper.....In March 2006, the commentator Stanislaw Michalkiewicz declared on the air: Jews have humiliated Poland internationally by demanding money.....Kikes sneak up behind us to try to oblige our government to pay them money.....Father Tadeusz Rydzik.....has stated on-air that Judaism is a "trade", not a religion."

On May 27, 2006 Michael Schudrich, Poland's Chief Rabbi, was punched and attacked with pepper spray on a Warsaw street by a man shouting, "Poland for the Polish".

While we felt it was necessary to go Poland to honor our Jewish martyrs, I believe Poland deserves its negative image. On our trip, I was told Poland is a poor country. It is bleak and gray in the cities. I can't say the same for our village of Ivansk, however.

The day before the rest of the Ivansker group arrived in Warsaw, I went to the Zydowski Cemetery on Okopowa Street to look for my great-grandfather's grave. After spending nearly two hours wandering through the vines, unmarked lanes, over and around broken matzevahs, I came to rest and reflect on the bench outside the cemetery office. There was a gentleman sitting there and he began to speak to me. Within a short time of talking to Leszek, I felt a small crack develop in the outer shell I'd come to Poland with. I'd left the hotel hoping no one would speak to me, especially when I was alone on the street: "What if they guess that I'm Jewish?" I thought.

Leszek told me that he comes to the Zydowski Cemetery often. His grandfather died in Majdanek, he said. He thinks he might have some Jewish blood. At least he wants to think that he might. When I arose to leave the cemetery Leszek asked if I would allow him to walk with me and show me Jewish sites, including the former borders of the Ghetto, where

the footbridge had connected the two sections of the Ghetto, and the place where a portion of the Ghetto wall stood. I took him up on his offer.

At the remnants of the Ghetto wall Lesek told me that he has been to Israel and Yad Vashem more than once. (He just came back from such a trip.) If only we could believe that the majority of the Poles were like Greg, Ewa, our lecturer, Wacław Wojciechowski and Leszek.

I think of volunteering some time in the future to Monika Krawczyk's Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage. Speaking of Monika, she is a gem and I wish for her whatever she wishes for herself. However, I cannot help wondering whether leaving synagogues standing in towns and villages devoid of any Jews serves any purpose, except perhaps for tour companies to capitalize on. What's the point? History already knows what happened there.

I went to see the new film, "Ever Again" about the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe, and it's no small phenomenon. Poland is not nearly the only place where anti-Semitism is thriving. I feel sad for our Polish friends. They are in an emotional struggle and are fighting an uphill battle. Bonnie

From: Gilda Iron

Sent: Thursday, November 02, 2006 4:52 PM

Subject: Re: welcome home

Dear Norton,

I've sat down at the computer a few times since we returned and I found that I had trouble putting my strong feelings into words. I can't believe that a week ago I was standing in the cemetery in Ivansk saying *Kaddish* for my lost relatives and all the Jews of Ivansk. I truly felt that my parents were there with me, praying with me and crying with me. {If there are plotches on this e mail, you know what they are.}

The first night, at dinner, we went around the room, introduced ourselves and told everyone why we came on the trip. For some people, it was a curiosity to see Ivansk; for others it was a search for their roots. I knew that I did not have to search for my roots. I grew up in a home that was filled with stories of Ivansk. Ivansk and the Ivansker Society were very much a part of my life and I always felt that I was not far removed from Poland.

Of course I was curious to see Ivansk but I felt that my purpose was to pay respect to my relatives and all the Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, those who were not put to rest with care and love. I was there to do this for me and for my parents. As well, I was paying respect to all the Jews who had been buried there in the cemetery over how many years and now have no one to visit their final resting place. I was also paying respect to the rich and wonderful history and culture, now lost.

Norton, please know that my purpose for the trip was truly fulfilled. Thank you and the others so much allowing me to have this enriching, unbelievably meaningful experience. I hope that we meet soon. Take care,

Gilda.



From: Sonny Monheit

Sent: Friday, November 03, 2006 6:40 PM

Subject: Re: welcome home

Hi Norton,

I would have liked to have contacted you sooner but after recovering from a cancelled flight and tracking down luggage and working all this week as well as trying to catch up on some sleep, I am going to take a few moments at this time to make a few short comments.

Aside from marrying Ellen, having my children and my grandchildren, and watching them mature, the nine days I spent in Poland with all those wonderful meshpacha was the most emotional, memorable, heartwarming experience of my life.

I will be commenting further in the near future with regard to what I felt at various times and at the different sites we visited and of my feelings towards some of the beautiful people I had the honour and privilege of spending time with. Your daughter Susan is very special. Speak soon, Sonny



From: Shelly Kesten**Sent:** Monday, November 06, 2006 9:28 AM**Subject:** RE: welcome home

Nissi,

We arrived home from Poland via Budapest the middle of last week and I am just now getting around to dealing with the media output from the trip.

I just want to let you know that I captured a good part of the Rededication ceremony on tape. I was recording on my camera while using it as the webcam for you. There are a couple of instances where the tape goes all over the place, probably when my cell phone shut down and I had to restart it and reconnect. I think that the communications to my computer on one side and the communications to the Internet on the other were too much for the phone. In any case I do have Susan's reading of your speech. I must say that every time that I see it, tears come to my eyes.

From: Lorne (Lazer) Taichman**Sent:** December 08, 2006**Subject:** RE: Thoughts about the trip

Hi Niss,

Here are my notes on my trip to Ivansk. I had always resisted a trip to Poland and especially to Ivansk. I guess Dad's bitter memories of his childhood there and the history of Polish anti-Semitism had done their work. Some of the resistance was leached out of me by a trip [Ettie and Rebecca [Lazer's wife and daughter] took several years ago to Poland when they contacted me from a pay phone in the Ivansk town square. I was quite surprised to react so emotionally to their presence there - react in a positive way that is. However, with your involvement in reclaiming the Jewish cemetery and in rededicating it, my resistance ended and I accepted, perhaps even welcomed, a trip to Poland.



And now that I have made the trip I am glad I went. I did not feel connected to this land or its people; in fact, it seemed strange to me that Dad could have come from these parts. I was pleased to learn more about Polish history and came to some understanding and even some sympathy for the damage done to these people by the decades of fascism and communism. However, I felt little compassion for the damage reeked by the Poles on themselves by their many years of anti-Semitism, by blaming the other instead of looking into their own souls. Perhaps, as you hope, the Ivansk Cemetery Project will lead to some sense of understanding and acceptance by the people in Iwaniska. If so, then your efforts will be well spent. I have a little harsher hope - that one day the residents of Iwaniska will come to realize just how empty their village is without its Jews.

The trip to Poland ended however, on a perfect note. After the cemetery dedication, Ettie and I went to Lodz, the home of her father, and then for a few days to Warsaw. Wandering around the memorial to the Warsaw ghetto, we came upon a large group of Israeli soldiers, also on a voyage of discovery. Then a short while later we came upon them again at the site of Mila 18 - they were lined up in neat rows, flags unfurled, straight at attention singing Ha Tikvah.

We have survived, we are strong and we remain Jews! Lazer

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