

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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The New Ivansk Website – Coming Soon

by Laurie Naiman

Palo Alto, California, USA

Since autumn 2003 the Ivansk Project e-Newsletters have kept us informed on the progress of the project, and brought many Ivanskers together from around the globe. Currently there are over 350 direct recipients of the newsletter.

It is now time to consider a website, which can offer the following additional capabilities:

- **Easy rapid access** to current and past newsletters, and the ability to make them available to new subscribers for downloading from the web (avoiding the problems often resulting from attempts to transmit these large files by email)
- **Frequent updating**
- **Ease of including graphic materials** (photos, maps, etc)
- **Ability to cross-reference** (using 'hypertext links' – the kind one clicks to get from selected text or an image to another location or page), and add external links and search capability (like Google - both within the website and across the world-wide web)
- **Provide a forum for members** to ask questions (e.g., help with genealogy or travel to Iwaniska, etc), submit testimony, stories, old Ivansk recipes, and participate in discussions
- **Low cost** ('no dead trees' needed). The main cost will be the modest fees for maintaining space for our website on a 'hosting' server

How did I get involved with the Ivansk Project and website?

In late 2006 I received a current Ivansk Project e-Newsletter from Norton Taichman. As I recall it was an attachment to an email sent primarily to our mutual friend Max Listgarten, Norton's colleague and a former apartment mate of mine, when we both did postgraduate work in Boston in the early sixties. When I noticed a reference to my family name I asked Norton to send me the past Ivansk newsletters, which I devoured with great interest and placed in a binder.

In Newsletter No.10 (page 4) an article by a landsman, Israeli film-maker David Blumenfeld cites a non-Jewish woman who lives in Iwaniska. In reflecting on her old neighbors she mentioned the Naimans, and their daughter Rivka who was one of her childhood friends. Later I came across a hand-drawn map of the shtetl as it existed in the 1930s (the so-called *Kesten-Brauner Map*), listing a home (identified as #49) inhabited by Leib Neiman. The latter rang a loud bell for me, prompting me to look up the computerized Naiman family tree compiled by my brother Arnold Naiman in the 90s, before he passed away. Yehuda Leib Neiman of Ivansk was listed as one of our ancestors. He was a brother of my father Maxwell Simon Naiman (born in nearby Opatow/Apt). Sadly there was no reference to Rivka Naiman. Of interest I learned that David Blumenfeld's paternal grandmother Yetta is listed as a Naiman in our family tree. As many of us are learning, it *is* a small world. And just recently while reviewing the shtetl map I learned that one of my longtime friends and medical classmates, Bernie Langer, is also an Ivansker. To make a long story shorter, this convinced me that I was an Ivansker, giving me some credibility in offering to put together a website about Ivansk and Ivanskers.

How did I get involved in creating websites?

Like Norton, I was born in Toronto, near Harbord Collegiate, and attended the University of Toronto where I got my medical degree in 1956. From there I worked and lived in Boston, Philadelphia and now in Northern California (Palo Alto/Silicon Valley). After retiring in 1999 I now spend much of my time nurturing my long-time interest in photography and newfound interest in website design. I learned the latter by reading and doing, with occasional help from 'techie' friends and colleagues in the area. Convinced that a good website can be an invaluable tool for sharing information and graphic materials and for teaching I developed several websites, including:

- A personal one, to share my experiences in the west with family and friends 'back 'home' (Toronto and Philadelphia)
- Several medical websites – for teaching and sharing information among students and professionals. Most recently: < <http://www.cbbsweb.org/> >
- Reunions – my 50th anniversary class reunions in Toronto for both my high school (Harbord Collegiate, 1950) and my medical class (University of Toronto, 1956) < <http://www.5t6med.org/index.html> >
- The Palo Alto Camera Club < <http://www.pacamera.com/> >
- My own personal photography website < <http://www.thirdeyview.net/> >

Although I know how to develop a useful and attractive website, I felt we needed additional professional help in order to meet some of the objectives being considered. With that in mind Norton and I invited fellow Ivaskers **Shelly Kesten** (Israel) and **Len Monheit** (Canada), who had previously indicated an interest in working on developing a new web site. Both have the knowledge and skills to help develop a website that will accomplish our goals. In the past few months we have been in frequent contact by email and by Internet phone conference calls, and will continue to keep in touch as the website is being developed.

Here are some of the current objectives for our website:

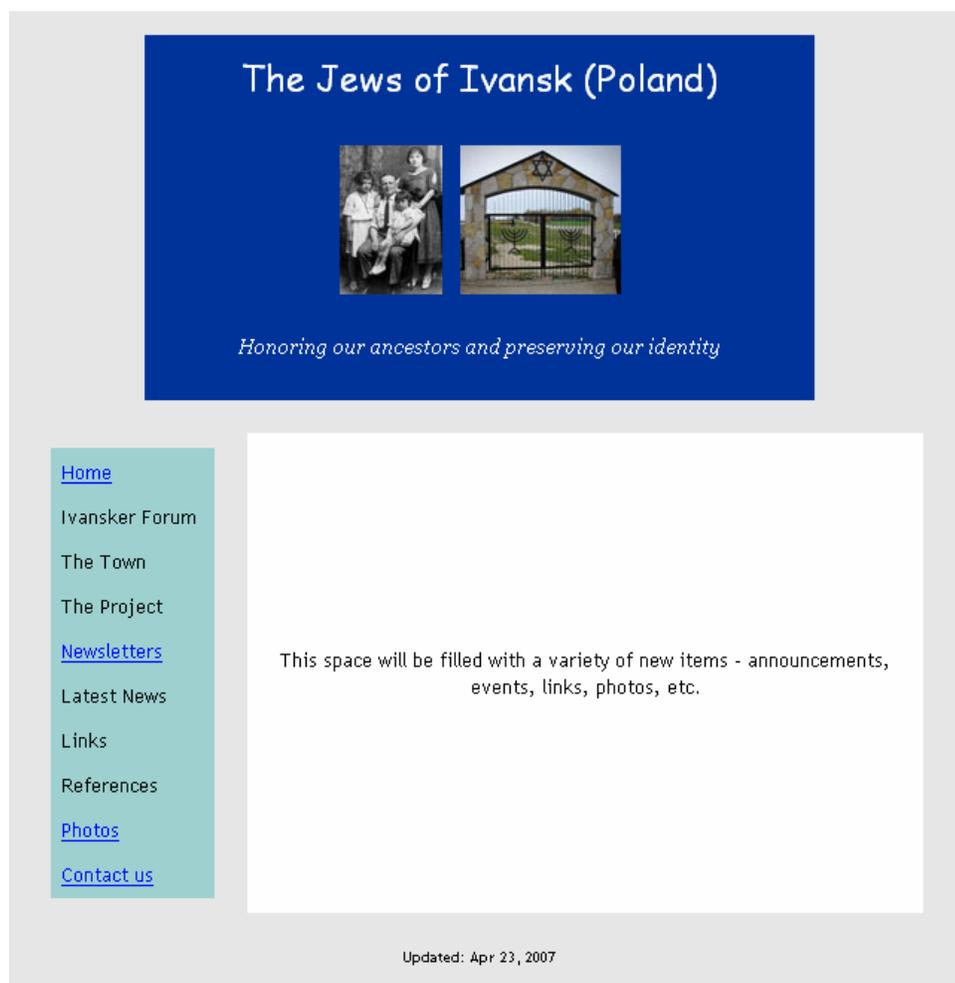
- to provide an easily accessible repository for the **newsletters and photos**
- to **reorganize some of the information in the newsletters**, copying some of the articles (such as current and historical information about the town, stories submitted by descendants, humor, recipes) into separate sections that can be easily searched
- to provide a **forum for Ivaskers** to submit comments, share stories, photos and maps, and participate in discussions (in the beginning this will be moderated by Norton Taichman)
- to **recognize accomplished Ivaskers** who have made notable contributions to their communities and the world in general
- to provide **links to websites of interest** (including videos), and references to books and other sources of information about Ivask and Ivaskers

To give you an idea of what the website may look like, I have posted a "draft website" on my personal photography website at this address:

< <http://www.ivask.thirdeyview.net/index.html> >.

(When we are ready to "go live" it will have a new name and address). When you visit the website the main information you'll find is at the link entitled 'Newsletters'. Clicking that link will take you to a new Table of Contents listing what is in each of the newsletters to date. In addition there is a 'Contact' link enabling email contact with Norton Taichman.

Below is what the **HOME PAGE** looks like:



The website is, as they say, “Under Construction”. At this point, Shelly, Len and I are very much interested in receiving your comments, questions and suggestions. Please **send all such comments by email** to Norton < nstaichman@comcast.net > who will forward them to us. Your input will help us develop the structure and systems needed to achieve a website that will serve the needs and interests of all Ivanskers, will be attractive and easy to navigate, and be a source of information and pride for present and future generations.

Members of the Website Team

Shelly Kesten (Israel)



Sheldon (Shelly) Kesten is the son of Yechiel and Ruchel Kesten (nee Brauner) who were both born in Ivansk. Chiel was an active member of the *Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society* (IMBS, Toronto) and Ruchel, the co-author of the Kesten-Brauner map, was active in the sisterhood.

Shelly's connection to Ivansk was nurtured from the strong influence at home. He blew Shofar during the years when the IMBS held High Holiday services at the society's building on Bathurst Street. Shelly, his wife Linda and family now live in Raanana Israel where the connection to Ivansk lives on in the Sefer Torah that that was donated by the IMBS

to the *Lechu Neranena* Synagogue where they are members. Shelly and Linda were participants in the cemetery rededication trip to Ivansk.

Professional Background: Shelly is a graduate of the University of Toronto in Computer Science. After working in Toronto at a small systems house for four years, Shelly and Linda made aliya. Shelly has worked for over 25 years in the Israeli computer industry, the last nine of which were at Microsoft, in their Consulting Services department. Since leaving Microsoft two and a half years ago, Shelly continues to consult on a part time basis through Microsoft Consulting Services.

Len Monheit (Canada)



Len is the grandson of Ivanskers and the son of Action Committee members, Ellen and Sonny Monheit (both of whom participated in the October Ivansk trip). Len's interest in the Project stemmed from the information gathered in part by his parents as well as through his own involvement in several of the interviews, including those with newly found relatives. This connection of past to present brings history, origins and roots to life and for Len, the project is as much about learning about the past in Ivansk, as it is about connecting to and building an ongoing community of Ivansker descendants around the world.

Len is the President & Editor of the Natural and Nutritional Products Industry Center (NPI Center), the industry's most widely used portal (www.npicenter.com) serving up over a million web pages a month for viewers around the globe. Len is also a contributing author and speaker internationally on a variety of issues involving functional foods and beverages and natural health products.

Laurie Naiman (USA)



Laurie grew up in Toronto and now lives in Palo Alto, CA. Through the shtetl map and one of the Ivansk Project e-newsletters he learned recently that a paternal uncle, Yehuda Leib Naiman, lived in Ivansk. Further genealogic research revealed several other Ivansk connections, including ancestors of a close friend and medical school classmate in Toronto.

Laurie is a retired physician (specializing in pediatric hematology). He received his MD from the University of Toronto and held academic positions at Temple University School of Medicine in Philadelphia and Stanford University School of Medicine in Palo Alto. Before retiring in 1999 Laurie was Medical Director of Blood Services with the American Red Cross in Northern California. He is the co-author of 3 editions of the book, "Hematologic Problems of the Newborn" (between 1966 and 1982) and has authored over 70 articles and chapters in medical journals and books.

Rededication of the Ivansk Jewish Cemetery- Participating in History

by Gary Lipton

Toronto, Ontario, Canada



In the 1930's over 10% of Polish citizens were Jewish, approximately 3.5 million people. Despite being subjected to prejudice and officially sanctioned anti-Semitism, Jewish involvement in all aspects of Polish culture and commerce reached extraordinary levels. Over the course of approximately 1,000 years, Jewish presence grew and conditions steadily improved. Beginning in the late 18th century the European Enlightenment heralded a period of increased rights and privileges for Jews, at least legally, on the same level as people of other religions. The Jewish version of the Enlightenment, the *Haskala*, brought Jews out of the ghettos and fostered a secularization of Jewish life. Jews were quick to embrace and succeed in all facets of Polish society: commerce, law, medicine, visual arts, and politics. But Jews remained outsiders, a separate community within the Polish Catholic majority. At the same time that Jewish life was generally improving, underlying anti-Semitism in Poland, in conjunction with opportunities to immigrate to countries offering greater freedoms, led to massive emigration from Poland. Between 1870 and 1914 over one million Jews left Congress Poland. After World War I, Jews continued to immigrate to Israel and to the West in great numbers.

Everyone who arrived in Warsaw in October 2006 for the Ivansk Cemetery Rededication is a product of the unique and rich Polish-Jewish experience. Each person came with varying levels of knowledge of history, but for all of us, or for any Jew of Polish descent, a visit to post-war Poland invokes contrasting images of rich Yiddish culture and German and Polish anti-Semitism and brutality.

The history of Polish Jewry and especially the relationship between Catholics and Jews is extremely complicated and confusing for the lay reader, and defies consensus among historians. Poland provided the stage for the interplay of a great number of peoples: Poles, Jews, Russians, Prussians, Germans, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians, to name a few. Great Rabbinical traditions and Jewish secular ideas were born and nurtured in this milieu. Moreover, the controlled, willful and heinous murder of approximately 3 million Polish Jews and 3 million Polish Gentiles in the Holocaust was perpetrated by the Germans on Polish soil. Fifty people from different places around the world, all with family ties to Ivansk, came together to learn, reflect, honour, and try to make some sense of it all.

After my first trip to Poland during the summer of 2005 I wrote a piece for the Ivansk Project e-Newsletter (Issue No. 14, Sept-Oct 2005) in which I attempted to relate my impressions and feelings. Whereas the dominant emotion that I experienced was horror and sadness, I was confused and awe-struck by the divergent, and at times conflicting, things that I saw and heard. My parents' generation of Canadian Jews repeated the oft heard phrase that "the Poles were worse than the Germans". In contrast to this, most of the Poles that I met on the trip held the view that wartime Poles suffered equally as Jews did at the hands of the Germans. Soon after the

country was occupied, the Nazis declared that helping Jews was an illegal act punishable by death. And in spite of this, thousands of Poles risked their lives and the lives of their families to help Jews. Also confusing was trying to understand what life was really like for Jews in pre-WW II Ivansk. My reading of European history, Jewish history, Yiddish literature, and years of discussion, provided only images and clichés. I can close my eyes and visualize snapshots of bearded Hasidim captured in black and white photos by Roman Vishniac. In his novels I. B. Singer describes the same period that Vishniac photographed. In contrast to Vishniac's images, Singer's characters are noteworthy for their vibrancy and diversity: secular and religious, communists and capitalists, farmers and industrialists, rich and poor, uneducated and urbane.

The rededication trip provided an opportunity for a new perspective for me. My primary concern was that the trip be comfortable and educational for everyone. As the itinerary was planned over many months, I tried to visualize the places that we were to visit and how we would benefit as a group. While I was looking after the concerns of the group and my own family, I was working with our Polish tour guides and tour operators who helped in making our trip a success. A running conversation developed with each of them. I learned that two had Jewish backgrounds that they were now embracing in different ways; this is a familiar story in modern Poland. Personally, as I became more involved in reading about the Holocaust, speaking with survivors and with Poles, my understanding of Jewish history in Poland became progressively more visceral and less cerebral, although always beyond comprehension.

Each of us on the trip had heard different stories about the Ivansk of our parents, grandparents and great grandparents. Many of those who immigrated from the old country did not long nostalgically for the shtetl days. Others had sentimental feelings toward the "*heim*", the homeland. Despite this ambivalence, there was a shared feeling in the group that our return to Ivansk was an important task invoking ancient ties, paying homage, and an opportunity to learn about our shared past by looking into an historical portal.

The Individual as a Participant in History

In the months that have passed since our return from the cemetery rededication I have tried to make sense of our trip. The more I reflect the more layers I encounter. Eventually, I have come to see us, the participants, as historical players. Today as I write it is the third day of *Hol Hamoed Pessach*, I am reminded of the words of the *Haggadah*:

In every generation one must see oneself as though personally come forth from Egypt, as it is written: "And you shall tell your child on that day, 'This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came forth from Egypt.'"

We are the remnant of the Exodus, both from Egypt and from Ivansk. Every one of us has a personal link to centuries of Ivansk Jewish life. The events of the trip, as well as the reading and conversations in preparation, put flesh and blood on otherwise isolated and unrelated historical events. All of us now have a strong personal link to the shtetl. As our tour bus approached Ivansk I could feel anticipation mount. A wave of excitement swept through the group when the Iwaniska town sign first came into view. As we descended from the bus, those who were born in the town and those who had personal references from family narratives needed to investigate unseen but familiar places. All of us shared the experience that we had at one time lived in Ivansk and were part of continuing history.

By educating ourselves about our past and by creating a memorial in the Ivansk Jewish cemetery we are faithful to the Jewish imperative of the perpetuation of national memory. More than any other people Jews are obsessed with memory. Even the Ivansk of 2006, long devoid of Jews,

could be vaguely and eerily familiar to us. Moreover, we are now part of the 'Magid', the Ivansk narrative.

"Now even if all of us were scholars, all of us sages, all of us elders, all of us learned in Torah, it would still be our duty to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. And whoever expands upon the story of the Exodus deserves praise."

Since our return from the trip we have all been engaged in telling the story. Many have contributed to the e-newsletter; others have shared their stories with the press; some have given public lectures; e-mails have gone back and forth for months among trip participants, and certainly we have all been talking to family and friends about our experiences. Putting aside any moral considerations of our trip in general and the rededication of the cemetery in particular, we are all now part of Ivansk history and have guaranteed that the story will continue to be recounted. We are now an inseparable part of Ivansk/Iwaniska history.

Our trip to Poland and Ivansk brought together numerous people, Jews from around the world bound together by a common heritage, and Poles of different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. It is rewarding to know that all of us who became involved with the cemetery rededication, Ivanskers, Polish colleagues, Iwaniskans, tour facilitators and government officials have now added to the history of the town and been enriched by involvement.

The Ivansk Cemetery Rededication was a conscious act of "*tikun olam*", making the world a better place. In a small way we have used our abilities and resources to educate ourselves and to take active roles in history, hopefully having a positive influence on future events.

Jewish Settlement in Poland, circa 900-1650 C.E.

by Norton Taichman

Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA

Introduction

By the Middle Ages Jew-hatred had already become deeply rooted in Christian Europe. Reviled by the Church as unrepentant killers of Christ, Jews were constantly slandered by the popes and the church fathers who viewed them as dangerous competitors for the soul of Christianity. The Church's Judeophobia corrupted all segments of Christian society; ultimately, the contagion was expressed by a lust for Jewish blood. Anti-Jewish hysteria intensified with the onset of the Crusades in the 11th century and climaxed in the 14th century with the eruption of the Black Plague. During these terrible times the position of the Jews in the West became untenable and many took to the roads in a desperate attempt to find refuge. Some left voluntarily; others were forcibly expelled from their homes.

Most set out to the East ... to Poland!

What were the underlying reasons for the growth of anti-Semitism in the West?

And why did our people believe that they could find sanctuary in Poland?

This essay *briefly* considers the circumstances surrounding the Jewish exodus from Western Europe to Poland. I have focused primarily on the upheaval of German Jewry because I suspect that the earliest Ivanskers lived in the Rhine Valley before immigrating to Poland. The narrative spans a period of approximately 750 years. I emphasize the word "*brief*": this is not a comprehensive history of this era in Jewish and European history but rather an oversimplification of a compelling story that is compressed to its bare essentials. My intent is to whet your appetite to learn more; the bibliography at the end of the essay is provided as a gateway to more extensive exploration.

If you are moved to delve deeper, or if you are knowledgeable on any aspect of the topic, please share your insights with our readers. Contact me to arrange for publication in a future e-Newsletter.

The Radhanites and The Khazars

In the 10th-11th century Jews began arriving in Poland in appreciable numbers. In earlier times it appears that only a few Jews may have lived in Poland. However, Jewish merchants (called the **Radhanites**, based in Spain and southern France) had been traversing the territory for many years establishing trade routes linking Christian Europe in the West with the Slavic lands to the East. As well, the Radhanites had commercial ties in Central Asia and with Moslem nations bordering the Mediterranean; they even ventured into China!

During the medieval period the Church prohibited Christians from trading with Moslems; this enabled the entrepreneurial Radhanites to enjoy virtual monopolies between European and Moslem markets. However, their influence waned during the Renaissance, largely because of fierce competition from the rising Italian mercantile republics.

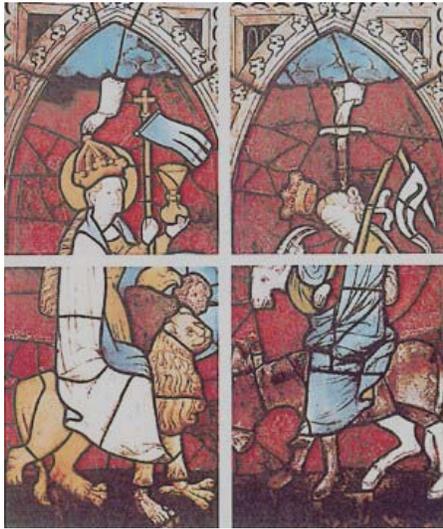
It is not surprising that Jewish settlements sprang up along the Radhanite trade routes, especially in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. These outposts provided vital contacts, information and advice about local markets. In this context, the Radhanites carried on an extensive trade in the **Kingdom of Khazaria**. Located on the eastern fringes of Europe in general region of the Crimea, Khazaria bordered Iran (in the south), Turkey (southwest), the Black Sea (west), the Caspian Sea (east) and Russia (north). A multicultural state comprised of Turks, Arabs, Slavs, Jews and other ethnic peoples Khazaria was a strategic east-west trading hub in the medieval world. In the 7th and 8th centuries the Khazars fought several wars with the Arabs preventing them, at least temporarily, from extending Islam into Europe.

Jewish refugees from Arab lands were warmly received in Khazaria in the 8th – 10th centuries and amazingly, in the middle of the 8th century many of the ruling elite actually converted to Judaism, which became the official religion of the empire. The Khazars are sometimes referred to as "*The Thirteenth Tribe*", and the Radhanites may have been instrumental in stimulating their conversion. The Khazars adoption of a Jewish identity reflected political as well as religious concerns, serving to bolster resistance against the influence of both the Christian Byzantines and the Muslim Arabs.

Continually assaulted by the Arabs, Byzantines, Russian tribes and finally by the armies of Genghis Khan, the Kingdom of Khazaria eventually fell in 10th-11th century. What happened to the Jews of Khazaria? This remains a subject of much speculation. Many probably adopted Islam or Christianity, but remnants fled north to Poland and Russia establishing the earliest Jewish

communities in Eastern Europe. However, the largest numbers of Jewish immigrants to reach Poland were Ashkenazim from Christian Europe, primarily Germany.

The Jewish World in Medieval Europe



The Church versus The Synagogue

The Church is portrayed as a King riding a lion; the Synagogue is a blindfolded woman, her staff broken, her crown falling to the ground.

Church window, Werben, Germany

Initially, Jews were scattered amongst the nations during the Babylonian Exile (700 BCE); subsequent dispersions by the Romans, the Byzantines and the Arabs forced our people to settle in lands far removed from our origins. By the 1st – 2nd century CE Jews inhabited many parts of Europe including Spain, Germany, France, Italy and even England. At first, they were generally tolerated by their European hosts, but this changed with the emergence of the Catholic Church and the gradual transformation of European societies from feudal to mercantile economies.

Beginning in the 4th century the Church turned its attention to the conversion of the Jews, but the majority stubbornly refused to yield to Christianity. The Church was inflamed! Jews were regarded as *“a large, well-organized, comparatively wealthy minority, well educated and highly religious, rejecting Christianity not out of ignorance but from obstinacy. They became for Christianity, a problem to be solved.”* [Johnson, 1987. pp164]. It made no difference whether Jews lived in Catholic or, later in Protestant Europe: denunciation, slander, ridicule, humiliation, exclusion, isolation, “ghettoization”, persecution, torture, forced baptism, expulsion, and ultimately murder and destruction were heaped upon them. All in the

name of “Divine Love”!

But it would be a mistake to paint Jewish Life in Medieval Europe entirely in dark colors. In many places Jewish spiritual, intellectual and economic creativity enriched Jewish culture and enhanced the well-being of the community at large. The Golden Age of Jewish Life in Spain is a prime example; indeed, there were other instances where Jews and Gentiles co-existed, at least for a time, in positive and productive ways.

However, in the Middle Ages Jews were never entirely safe from the enmity of the Church, the nobility or the mob. At one time or another they were regarded as unwelcome outsiders in almost every European state. Jews became the scapegoats for the ills of society. The Jew was regarded as the devil’s servant, the Christ-killer, polluter, blasphemer, voracious money-lender, poisoner of wells, ritual murderer, economic competitor and on and on. He was accused of every imaginable crime, and the mob, with or without the concurrence of the Church or secular authorities, could rise up in righteous frenzy to purge the scourge. The slightest pretext, an unfounded rumor or the ranting of a crazed preacher were enough to ignite orgies of hatred directed against the Jewish community.

What’s more, in all this there was potential profit for non-Jews; Jewish property could be legally confiscated; Jews were burdened with crippling taxes, and debts owed to them by Gentiles could be cancelled without recourse. During this period feudal-based economies were in decline coincident with the emergence of commercial and mercantile activities on the part of the indigenous Christian population. Jews came to be regarded as ravenous competitors, and restrictive laws were

enacted to limit their influence. As their commercial edge gave way to Christian competition, Jews were no longer critical to sustain the economic growth of their host nations.

* * * * *

The Crusades (1095-1291) were the spark that initially spurred large numbers of European Jews to abandon their homes and flee eastward.

At that time the Moslems ruled Palestine; Christendom could not tolerate their holy sites being under infidel control and Pope Urban II announced a sacred mission to vanquish Islam. Thousands of men from every social class (even children) and from all corners of the Christian world responded to the call. Poorly lead and organized they set out by land and by sea in anticipation of salvation, glory, adventure and fortune. Soldiers of the Cross received forgiveness for their sins as well as a guaranteed place in Paradise. But the stated objective of the expedition quickly turned against the Jews as well as the Moslems. In the Christian mind Jews were just as guilty of defiling Christ as the Moslems. It was ludicrous to sacrifice and endure hardship to overthrow God's enemies in distant Palestine while ignoring the Jews who still remained in Europe.

And so an avalanche of terror descended upon generations of European Jews. Fueled by lust for blood and loot, Christ's warriors, supported by throngs of on-lookers, rampaged across Europe. During the course of nine or more crusades hundreds of Jewish communities were impoverished and decimated, especially in Germany, France and England. The condition of the Jews in Europe was now more tenuous than ever.

On the twenty-third of Iyar they attacked the community of Worms. The community was then divided into two groups; some remained in their homes and others fled to the local bishop seeking refuge. Those who remained in their homes were set upon by the steppe-wolves who pillaged men, women, and infants, and children and old people. They pulled down the stairways and destroyed the houses, looting and plundering; and they took the Torah Scroll, trampled it in the mud, and tore and burned it. The enemy devoured the children of Israel with open maw. Translated from The Chronicle of Solomon bar Simson, dating from 1453. (Library of Jews' College, London and Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem)



Jews Burning in Hell

Identified by their pointed hats, the hapless Jews are being boiled alive. The devil stands on the right. The inscription on the caldron reads, *Juda*. German manuscript, 1175

But this was only the beginning. In the wake of the Crusades other calamities fell upon Europe's Jews.

In 1348-1350 **The Black Death** (The Great Pestilence; The Great Mortality) ravaged Europe killing more than one-third of the population (in some regions mortality reached 70%); it hit all social classes and its victims died in terrible agony; it was the worst pandemic in human history. Other plagues followed the outbreak of 1348, but none was as devastating or had such profound and lasting effects on the course of European history.

The cause of the epidemic is still under inquiry; it was certainly an infectious disease. The traditional explanation posits that flea-bearing rats transmitted the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis* to humans. New evidence has stimulated speculation whether other bacteria, such as the anthrax bacillus or *Ebola*-type viruses could have been responsible for the pestilence.

In the Middle Ages no one knew what caused this dreadful affliction. But it did not take long for the medieval mind to come up with the

answer: it must be devil's work! In the 14th century the devil was not merely a metaphor; for many he was very real! And who worshiped Satan? Who conspired with the devil to destroy Christianity? The Jew!!!

First in Switzerland and then in Germany Jews yielded under torture and confessed to poisoning the wells to avenge ill-treatment received from Christians. The ridiculousness of the charge was appreciated even by many Church leaders who tried to temper the fury of the masses...to no avail. Across Europe one massacre after another ensued ... thousands of Jews lay dead ...hundreds of communities were annihilated ... the carnage even exceeded that of the Crusades. The plague firmly cemented the negative image of the Jew in the Christian world and grievous calamities, too numerous to mention here, were heaped upon us.

Even to this day we remember the Crusades and the Black Death: in the Shabbat service the *Av Ha-Rachamim* (Father of Mercies) prayer pays homage to the Jewish victims of these calamities. The prayer seeks rest for the martyrs and vengeance on the perpetrators [Hammer, 1994].

So went the tale of woe decade after decade, endlessly. Four hundred years had passed since the hideous nightmare had begun. Hounded by successions of crusaders, by restrictions of the Church councils, the torments of the Rindfleisch and the Armleder, the accusations of ritual murder and blasphemy, the hatred of the Dominicans and Jew-baiters, the Black Death and the libels which it engendered, the Hussite wars and Capistrano, Jewish life at the opening of the fifteenth century was a poor, hopeless, broken thing.
[Sachar, 1964. pp203]

For European Jews the writing was on the wall. They were confronted with three choices: convert to Christianity, leave voluntarily or wait until they were expelled.

But where to go?

For many, especially German Jews, the choice lay to the east in the Kingdom of Poland!

Why Poland?

Shumel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970), the first Jew to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1966), composed this short piece that provides a framework to address this question (cited in Polonsky, 2004. pp ix)

POLIN

We did not know, but our fathers told us how the exiles of Israel came to the land of Polin (Poland).

When Israel saw how its sufferings were constantly renewed, oppressions increased, persecutions multiplied, and how the evil authorities piled decree on decree and followed expulsion with expulsion, so that there was no way to escape the enemies of Israel, they went out on the road and sought an answer from the paths of the wide world: which is the correct road to traverse to find rest for the soul? Then a piece of paper fell from heaven, and on it the words:

Go to Polaniya (Poland)

So they came to the land of Polin and they gave a mountain of gold to the king, and he received them with great honour. And God had mercy on them, so that they found favour from the king and the nobles.

the next 200-300 years. The pagan nobility and the masses continually resisted (sometimes violently) the Church's determined efforts to convert them.

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As stated earlier, Jewish immigration to Poland began in earnest in the 10th century, even before Christianity became the state religion. The tempo picked up with the onset of the Crusades in 1095-1096. Because of their initial lukewarm reception of Christianity, the Poles provided little support for the Crusades, and this was a critical consideration for Jews seeking to escape the rampaging mobs in the West. Mieszko and his immediate successors, especially **Boleslaus III, the Pious**, appreciated that the Jews had the expertise and experience to advance the country's primitive economy and welcomed them despite Poland's official ties to Rome.

In general, the years following Mieszko's death were characterized by conflict and instability. Many of his successors were not as capable or as powerful. There was constant infighting for authority and influence among the Piast princes, the nobility and the knights. At the same time the Church was determined to impose itself on the population, and Poland's neighbors continued to assault its borders. Nevertheless, the economy grew and Jews kept trickling in from Western Europe.

By the mid 13th century a new menace emerged on Poland's eastern frontier: Genghis Khan and his ferocious Mongolian army were advancing westward sweeping all before them. In 1241 and again in 1259 and 1287 they wreaked havoc on southern sections of Poland. Eventually the Mongolian hordes retreated, but the Polish economy was left in ruins.

Recognizing that outside expertise was required to restore the economy, **King Boleslaus III** encouraged German burghers and Jews to move into Poland. In 1264 he issued **The Statute of Kalisz** (also known as "The General Charter of Jewish Liberties") to entice Jewish immigrants. The document was unprecedented in scope, consisting of 38 far-reaching privileges or guarantees that affected almost every aspect of Jewish life.

The privileges granted to the Jews formulate laws defining relationships between Jews and the rest of the population and the state, their rights to residence and trade, to erect synagogues and to establish cemeteries, and the scope of judicial jurisdiction exercised by the king or landowner in relation to that of the community (kehilla) organization. They also define the obligations of the Jews towards the ruling authorities, and their rights and duties in respect to the burghers, as well as certain aspects of life within the community and the communal organization itself. (Goldberg, 1985. pp 1)

In part, the Kalisz statutes included the following provisions:

- Jews fell under the jurisdiction of princely rather than municipal courts.
- Jews were regarded as "slaves of the treasury" (*servi camerae*); their person and property were protected by the crown
- Jews were granted free trade including the right to engage in money lending
- Jews were accorded religious freedom
- Jewish communities were given the right of self government

Over time new laws were added and old pronouncements were amended or annulled by succeeding rulers. Most important, the charters were not automatically validated; documents issued by one king had to be sanctioned by his successor or they were deemed invalid. And in many communities the statutes were largely brushed aside, particularly in the larger towns where

the Church and German and Polish burghers had attained wealth and power (see below).

But compared to other European nations these guarantees were, in principle, exceptionally generous and for good reason. Jews were seasoned traders, merchants and bankers; they had been key players in the transformation of Western Europe from agrarian to money-based commercialism. In Germany, for example, the emerging burgher class was now engaged in trading and profit-making pursuits, including money lending, that were traditionally the purview of the Jews. Fierce competition ensued and edicts extended advantages to Gentiles at Jewish expense. Christians became the preferred creditors to the royal houses instead of the Jews, many of whom were now forced to become lenders to the poorest segments of society. Many Jewish entrepreneurs were impoverished and were no longer required to fuel the economy. Jews became expendable, and now the nations of Western Europe were less reluctant to throw them out.

The Polish economy, on the other hand, was still feudal in character. The Polish nobility held large estates and refused to engage directly in mercantile pursuits. Something needed to change or the country would not be able to compete with its neighbors. The Jews were seen as the instrument of that change. Not only did they understand monetary affairs, many were literate both in the Scriptures and in secular subjects, such as medicine. Moreover, Jews respected the laws of the state, giving the nobility no cause for concern that they would seek to undermine their authority. From a financial perspective, the invitation extended to Jewish immigration made very good sense.

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At this time the social order in Poland was organized into six castes or estates: the Crown, the nobility (called the “*szlachta*”, consisting of landed as well as landless gentry), the clergy, the burghers (primarily German and Polish merchants) and the peasantry. The Kalisz Statutes created a sixth estate, the Jews.¹ Membership in each estate was primarily determined by heredity and each caste was granted specific legal rights and privileges.



Kazimierz the Great

Notwithstanding the recognition and protections the crown and nobility afforded to the Jews, the Church maintained its relentless campaign of vilification and denunciation. Likewise, the German burghers, who had migrated to Poland, brought with them the prejudices that pervaded Western Europe and sought to curtail Jewish economic competition. Thus, the virus of Judeophobia began its spread among the masses setting the stage for the initial outbreak of pogroms in Poland in 1349. These eruptions coincided with the onset of the Black Death in Western Europe. Fortunately, the epidemic was not as brutal in Poland because its sparsely distributed population did not provide conditions for optimal dissemination of the infection. Despite the growth of anti-Jewish sentiments in the general population, Jewish refugees were still welcomed in Poland by a tolerant and visionary ruler, **King Kazimierz III (the Great)** and by the majority of the *szlachta* who had forged strong

¹ By the 14th-17th century Poland had become a multicultural state. Only 40% of its population was Polish; the remainder included Russians, Germans, Lithuanians, Armenians, Scots, Swedes, Tatars and Jews. Although the majority of Polish Jews were Ashkenazim, many Sephardim reached Poland after being expelled from Spain and Portugal. Most minorities enjoyed a high degree of religious freedom as compared to other European countries. Moreover, there were no ghettos in Poland during this time; there may have been “Jew Streets” in many towns and cities but unlike the rest of Europe, Jews were not ostracized and humiliated by being required to wear distinctive clothing (eg, pointed hats, yellow badges).

economic alliances with Poland's Jews (see below).

Kazimierz III, grandson of Bolesalus III, ruled Poland from 1333-1370. A forceful and capable leader he firmly established Poland's sovereignty and promoted learning and culture in his kingdom. Kazimierz founded the university in Krakow where secular subjects, such as medicine and law rather than religious studies, were offered. He was a successful military commander extending Poland's domain into Silesia and Lithuania, and in the east he acquired territory that was to become part of Russia and the Ukraine.

In 1334 Kazimierz reaffirmed The Statutes of Kalisz adding additional clauses granting Jews their own fiscal, legal and political organizations. He also prohibited kidnapping and forceful baptism of Jewish children and desecration of Jewish cemeteries. Under Kazimierz the pace of Jewish immigration accelerated and for the next 200-250 years almost all the Polish kings were favorably disposed towards them. This was the "**Golden Age of Polish Jewry**"; indeed, it was also a period in which Poland itself flourished and reached the height of its power.

From the very beginning of their settlement in Poland, the Jews were required to populate the towns and engage in urban activities. There was never any need for extra peasants in Poland – indeed throughout history there was a surplus – and the Jews were actually barred from settling the land.

*During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the towns of Poland flourished and the middle class arose. Its members were mainly of Jewish and German origin and they controlled virtually the entire commerce and related trades of the country. The few Poles who engaged in commerce and industry abandoned their occupations as soon as they became wealthy and, under the pressure of the social climate, passed into the class of the landowning nobility. Unlike Western Europe, Poland did not develop a native Christian bourgeoisie; even in the 1930s such a bourgeoisie did not exist on a scale comparable with that in the West.
(Marcus, 1983. pp 5)*

Jewish Self-Government: the Kehilla and the Council of the Four Lands

As a consequence of the freedoms granted to them, Polish Jews established a measure of community self-government based on Halachic precepts. Jewish life was centered in the *kehilla* (*pl*; *kehillot*): at first each region had its own kehilla but in the 1500s these autonomous organizations were consolidated into the Council of the Four Lands (*Vaad Arba Arazot*) whose purpose was to address Jewish issues on the national level.

The kehilla dominated the lives of every Jew in the community. It approved residence for newcomers and expelled transgressors. The kehilla maintained the cemetery, organized funerals, administered the shul, the cheder, the bath house, the slaughterhouse and the sale of kosher meat. It established charitable organizations including hospitals and orphanages and provided dowries for poor brides. The kehilla assessed each household for taxation purposes for the upkeep of communal institutions and services and to pay rent owed to the landowners. Initially, the king or the nobles selected town elders (usually rabbis and the wealthiest men in the community) to serve on the kehillot, but by 1500 members were elected by the Jewish community.

In 1581 The Council of Four Lands was constituted to deal with concerns affecting Jews throughout Poland, including taxation and commercial matters, cultural and spiritual life, settlement of disputes between Jewish communities, protection of the family, Jewish property rights and the

defense of the nation². The Council met at least annually and was attended by elected delegates (including elders, rabbis and scholars) from four Jewish regions (or lands) of the country. Later, Lithuania was added as a fifth region.

The kehillot were independent of the Polish municipal court system and their authority can be appreciated by studying their roles in adjudicating social, religious and other disputes. The following are excerpts taken from an account written by Nathan Hannover, a rabbi who lived in 17th century Poland:

The Pillar of Justice

... There were courts in every town, and if people did not care to try their case before the court of their own town they could go to a nearby court. And if they did not care to try their case before a nearby court, they could go to a superior court, for in every province there was a higher court. ... If, however, different communities, through their leaders, would start litigation among themselves, in order to try their case they would appear before the leaders of the Four Lands who met twice a year. The leaders of the Four lands were just like the Sanhedrin [of old which met in the Temple] in the Hewn Chamber for they had the power to judge every Jew in the kingdom of Poland: to issue prohibitions, to enact ordinances, and to punish people as they saw fit. ... The lawsuit of a Jew would never come before Gentile judges, nor before the court of any magnate, nor before the king himself – may his glory be exalted. If, however, a Jew should attempt to try his case before the judges of the Gentile courts, he would be severely reproached for he made it appear that “our enemies are our judges” [Deuteronomy 32:31].

(cited in Marcus, J.R. 1978. pp 207)

The rights of the Jews to govern their own internal affairs coupled with the protection of their person and property as legislated by the Charters gave them a sense of security and stability that could not be found elsewhere in Europe. Poland became host to a Jewish renaissance that rivaled the brilliance achieved by Spanish Jewry. By the end of the 18th century approximately 75% of Europe's Jews lived in Poland. In the words of Rabbi Moses Isserles (circa 1525-1572) Poland's hospitality had no equal: *“Had not the Lord left this land as a refuge, the fate of Israel would indeed have been unbearable. By the grace of God, both the kings and the nobles are favourably disposed towards us. In this country there is no fierce hatred as there is in Germany”* (cited in Rabinowicz, 1965. pp7). But it was not to last much longer.

Jewish Involvement in Poland's Economy

Thanks to legislative protections economic opportunities abounded in Poland, and Jews filled every available niche. A minority became moneylenders and bankers, extending loans and credit to the nobility and to the peasants. Most Jews were engaged in domestic and international trade, distributing farm produce, trading in horses and cattle, importing and exporting textiles, luxury goods and raw materials. Jewish physicians and surgeons served every segment of Polish society. In the market towns (*shtetls*) Jews became the primary purveyors to the peasants; storekeepers were clustered around the market square while itinerant peddlers carried their wares into the countryside. Large contingents were artisans and craftsmen including tailors, cobblers, tanners, and iron mongers. Some were occupied in minting coins for the royal treasury, operating

² In Poland, as opposed to other European countries, Polish Jews were involved in meeting the defensive needs of the nation. They paid taxes to fortify the cities and protect the nation's borders. And in the 16th century they even served as soldiers in the Polish army.

distilleries, taverns and mills and developing mines. Many attained wealth and prominence and rose to become members of a capitalistic Jewish middle class. However, this was not universal; many Jews were powerless, trapped on the lowest rung of the economic ladder.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Jewish involvement in the Polish economy was their relationship to the Polish nobility. As stated before, the szlachta was comprised of the landed as well as landless gentry. In the 16th century a handful of land owners (approximately 6-7% of the population) possessed large parcels of land including the towns, villages and cities therein; they controlled approximately 60% of the country's land mass. These “**magnates**” enjoyed considerable wealth and authority. At the top of the socioeconomic ladder they presided over just about every aspect of life within their domain. They determined who could live on their land and what these people were permitted to do. Moreover, the magnates had inherited the right to sit in parliament (*Sejm*) where they exercised political and economic muscle in matters of state, including the election of the king. Rivalry between the nobles and the kings progressively sapped the monarch's power. Eventually, governmental authority no longer rested with the crown but was spread amongst the szlachta whose loyalties and sense of national responsibility were often self-serving. This decentralized organization lacked an effective state bureaucracy and was unable to attend to important military, economic and political matters. Serious consequences were to follow.

By tradition the Polish aristocracy was dedicated to pleasure and to their land holdings. With little or no direct interest in commerce or industry, they relied heavily on the Jews to manage their financial affairs. Jews kept their books, wrote their letters, collected their rents, taxes, and tolls and managed their estates as well as their fixed assets, such as the inns, breweries, taverns and mills. At first, Jews had little or no competition in serving their overlords, but the situation began to change with increasing numbers and influence of German and Polish merchants and artisans; the Jewish monopoly was being steadily eroded, especially in the cities and towns.

* * * * *

By the 1500-1600s, thousands of Jews began seeking new opportunities in the recently conquered and colonized Ukrainian hinterlands where Polish magnates owned vast tracts of land. In this setting a new financial arrangement, referred to as the **Arenda System**, was contracted between the szlachta and the Jews; the nobility granted their Jewish intermediaries a no-holds-barred lease of their lands, including villages, towns and cities. Jews paid rent to the nobleman and had a free hand in pocketing income from the property.

Those who held such a lease could in turn sub-lease parts of the estate or economic activities associated with it to friends and relatives. ... Almost all of the leaseholders were Jews. They paid for the right to work as tax collectors, artisans, administrators, and scribes. They also leased the right to run the flour mills, breweries, and inns. Their rent [to the magnates] had to be paid year in and year out, in good times and bad. And whenever the leases were renewed, nobles often increased the rent. Whenever a fee went up, that increase was passed on to the peasants in the form of higher taxes, fees, tolls, and prices.

The peasants deeply resented both the noble who ruled their land and the Jews who collected his taxes and carried out his orders.

[In: Facing History and Ourselves. The Jews of Poland. 1998. pp 42.]

In fact, the enmity of the Ukrainian peasants was directed primarily against the Jews, not their absentee Polish landlords. The situation was further aggravated by growing religious and ethnic rivalries between the Poles and the Ukrainians: Poles were Roman Catholics and the Ukrainians

belonged to the Orthodox Church. Ukrainian peasants were held in contempt by Polish landholders who responded to any threats of rebellion with great cruelty. It was only a matter of time before things got out of control.

Enter **Bohdan Chmielnicki** (1595-1657): a minor land-owning Ukrainian nobleman, who initially did not resist Polish colonization, Chmielnicki became a fierce opponent to colonial rule after a rival Polish landlord seized his land and killed his son. In 1648-1651, with the support of the peasants and Orthodox clergy, he organized an army of Cossacks and Tatars and marched into south-eastern Poland. In numerous bloody encounters Chmielnicki defeated his enemies who lacked the will and the leadership to withstand his assaults. The wars took a terrible toll: thousands upon thousands of Poles and Jews were indiscriminately slaughtered in the Ukraine and in southern Poland. Famine and epidemics swept over the land, and refugees flooded the roads trying to escape the massacring Cossacks. The situation was so desperate that many Jews even fled back to Western Europe! Jews referred to the Chmielnicki uprising as "The Great Deluge"; it was the greatest catastrophe that they were to endure up until the Nazi Holocaust.

(I do not pretend to have much knowledge surrounding the circumstances of the Jewish experience in the Ukraine. My instincts are that we were in the wrong place, at the wrong time and for all the wrong reasons. This does not excuse the wanton slaughter of the innocent, but it should serve as a warning that those who are accessories to oppression eventually come to pay a heavy price.)

Poland lay in ruins; the economy was broken; the government was ineffectual. As if this were not enough, Poland's neighbors capitalized on its weakness and its borders were continually breached from all sides by the Swedes, Russians, Germans, Cossacks and Tatars.

Economic and political retrogression was accompanied by growing intolerance and a strengthening of obscurantist tendencies, above all within the Catholic Church, so that the accusations of ritual murder against the Jews which had earlier been relatively rare in Poland now became much more frequent. These coincided with the increasing impoverishment of the Jewish community which led to difficulties in paying taxes and to the abolition in 1764, of the Council of the Four Lands. (Abramsky, Jachimczyk & Polonsky, 1986. pp 5.)

It was the end of the Golden Age of Polish Jewry. The Ukrainian revolt also marked an ominous turning point in Polish history: the republic was torn from within and from without, and by the end of the 18th century it had lost its independence and was partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria. The freedoms that had been granted to the Jews were nullified. Even under these less than ideal circumstances, Jewish life in Poland continued with many vibrant spiritual, intellectual, scientific and materialistic triumphs. But it never attained its full promise. Xenophobic forces opposed to the concept of a multicultural and multiethnic state, including Polish nationalists and the Catholic Church, were emboldened and successfully implanted their regressive values throughout Polish society. Jews were no longer welcome in Poland. Two hundred years later the Shoah came as the final, fatal blow, and for all intents and purposes Poland today remains *Judenrein*.

Even when it had regained its independence in 1918 after World War I; even though it had been ravaged by the Germans and Russians during World War II; even after decades of Communist subjugation and stagnation; and even despite its own struggles to reemerge as an independent nation in 1989, Poland has yet to fully comprehend and deal with the lessons of its own history. There was a time when the Poles had the audacity and the imagination to lead the world as a showplace of tolerance. They can do it again, but it will take generations. Many encouraging signs are evident in today's Poland and maybe some day it will really happen.

Jewish Settlement in Ivansk: Many Questions but Very Few Answers

During the course of researching this essay numerous questions relating to our ancestors' arrival in Poland and their settlement of Ivansk came to mind.

First, where did we come from? It is likely that we originated in "Ashkenaz", in Germany. The majority of Ivanskers have Germanic surnames, and German Jews constituted the largest group of refugees to reach Poland from the West. While such evidence is far from conclusive, I think it's reasonable to postulate that our people probably came from Germany.

When and where did they settle in Poland? We are told that the first Jews appeared in Ivansk during the 18th century (see: "Pinkas HaKehillot of Iwaniska" in The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, Issue No 2, Jan-Feb 2004), long after the main contingent of German Jews had reached Poland. Relatively few Jews crossed into Poland in the 18th-19th century because the situation in the West had greatly improved and because Poland no longer welcomed or offered great opportunities for Jewish newcomers. Thus, it seems likely that the earliest Ivanskers probably arrived and lived in Poland for some period before deciding to move to Iwaniska.

Why did they settle in Iwaniska? The 18th century was a time of great hardship in Poland. In the late 1790s the country was partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria; Iwaniska was in the Russian zone, the "Pale of Settlement". Life under the Czar was no picnic for either Poles or Jews. My guess is that Iwaniska was a poor farming community with limited economic prospects. Perhaps our ancestors saw Iwaniska as an opportunity to fill a need and to apply their entrepreneurial talents (it wasn't the first or last time Jews saw potential in a "hopeless" situation.) The earliest pioneers established a small enclave in the town, and over time more arrived and set to work. By the 20th century at least half the population of Ivansk was Jewish.

I wonder whether Jewish settlement in Ivansk mirrored a chain-link pattern of migration. This idea stems from the way most Ivanskers wound up with family and friends in Toronto during the 19th-20th century. Was a similar linkage operational in the movement of Jews to Iwaniska? It would be fascinating if we could trace our pre-Ivansk origins to an earlier Polish shtetl and to a town or village somewhere in Germany.

We are a wandering, restless people. We've been compared to the canary in the mine; the first to sense something's wrong. We seem to be a barometer of a nation's moral and ethical standards and its economic potential. When it's not good for Jews it's usually not very hospitable for anyone else. Many of us are still wandering, seeking a place where we can live as Jews without fear. Even in Western nations, and unbelievably once again in Europe, our people are confronted by the emergence of anti-Semitism. It does indeed appear that the more things change the more they remain the same. Our wanderings continue but, thankfully, we now have Israel where we're always welcome and where we've made the desert bloom.

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