

A Reflection on Poland Trip

By: Rick Feldman

5-13 July 2016

Prologue

Just a month ago we headed to Poland with anticipation of a trip to remember. Having spent the last ten years connecting to the stories of our familial and communal past, I was prepared to experience this adventure on many levels. The following is an account of what I discovered and how this trip exceeded my expectations. I hope in telling the story I will be a catalyst for my readers to explore their family roots and look for the connections and meaning to which these journeys can lead us.

1

Our trip to Poland was not an ordinary vacation. We were fifty plus people gathered from all corners of the US, Canada, Europe and Israel. Our missions were two-fold: to reclaim a piece of our past such as a tombstone of a relative, an apartment address we had in a village, or a business location. And to collectively, as embassaries of the World Zaglembe Organization*, commemorate and recognize the atrocities that befell our people at each town and ghetto in the Zaglembe Region of Poland – with our final ceremony at the end of all these roads – Auschwitz/Birkenau. (Zaglembe means depth and refers to the coal and bauxite deposits in the area).



1

The Zagłębie Region of Poland is in Silesia at the Southwest corner – twenty miles North of the small town of Oswiecim which is known to the world as Auschwitz. In this case geography was destiny not only because of the rich coal deposits.

This was what we expected out of our trip, what we didn't expect was that in discovering our shared stories we would begin to craft a shared identity... While we could not replace any of the loss that occurred, we could 'adopt' one another as a connection to all the life that was and comfort each other in the sense that only those who have shared a difficult passage can. We could also share a sense of hope that, while the fire that raged across Europe over seventy years ago destroyed the fabric of all life there, it did not entirely destroy the roots of that life. And that from these roots, one could sense that the conditions could one day be right for new growth to move us into a new connection with Poland.

2

It was Tuesday morning, July 5th, the second morning of our trip. My roommate, Mel Stein, from Toronto, Canada, was lighting a yahrzeit candle in our room, at the Hotel Szafran in Czeladź, Poland in honor of his father, Joseph's (Wolf Isaac) yahrzeit. A few hours later in the Czeladź Jewish Cemetery, Mel would be kneeling at the gravesite of his paternal grandmother, Sura Rivkah Jakubowicz Stein, —, lighting a candle for her as well....How this improbable scenario came about is exemplary of the experience of many of us.

A few weeks earlier Mel had been uncertain if he would go on our trip to Poland. At the time he had an email exchange with Jeff Cymbler*. Jeff, a lawyer from New York, had been involved in tracking his family to Poland since the 1980's. Since then he had done extensive personal genealogy work and written a book about the local cemeteries entitled: The Cemetery of the Jewish Communities of Będzin, and Czeladź Poland....



Jeff told Mel that, in fact, his grandmother was interred in the Czeladź Cemetery. That was all Mel needed to hear. He signed on to the trip which brought him to this moment.

This reclaiming of a unique piece of our past was a large part of our trip for each of us. Jeff Cymbler was our first guide. Before the trip we worked with him through emails to gather information about cemetery markers, birth, marriage and death records, and addresses of family

homes or businesses. He culled this information from various documents that that he had gathered over the years.

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| 55 | Teczka zawiera akta skonfiskowanej żydowskiej firmy spożywczej należącej do: Mendel Kleiner – Sosnowiec Teczka zawiera: średnio 30 stron co stanowi zbliżoną ilość klatek mikrofilmowych Akta szyte w teczce. Akta pochodzą z lat 1939-1944 |
| 56 | Teczka zawiera akta skonfiskowanej żydowskiej firmy spożywczej należącej do: Wiener – Sosnowiec Teczka zawiera: średnio 30 stron co stanowi zbliżoną ilość klatek mikrofilmowych Akta szyte w teczce. Akta pochodzą z lat 1939-1944 |
| 57 | Teczka zawiera akta skonfiskowanej żydowskiej firmy spożywczej należącej do: Cukierman & Szpigelman – Sosnowiec Teczka zawiera: średnio 30 stron co stanowi zbliżoną ilość klatek mikrofilmowych Akta szyte w teczce. Akta pochodzą z lat 1939-1944 |
| 58 | Teczka zawiera akta skonfiskowanej żydowskiej firmy spożywczej należącej do: Zygelbaum – Sosnowiec Teczka zawiera: średnio 30 stron co stanowi zbliżoną ilość klatek mikrofilmowych Akta szyte w teczce. |

*German trusteeship
Confiscated Jewish firm
Company*

Jeff found this document of my mother’s family, the Szpigelman’s, that made reference to the German trusteeship that confiscated Jewish property. He directed us to a researcher, Jakub Czupryński***who could help us to further our efforts at retrieving the document.

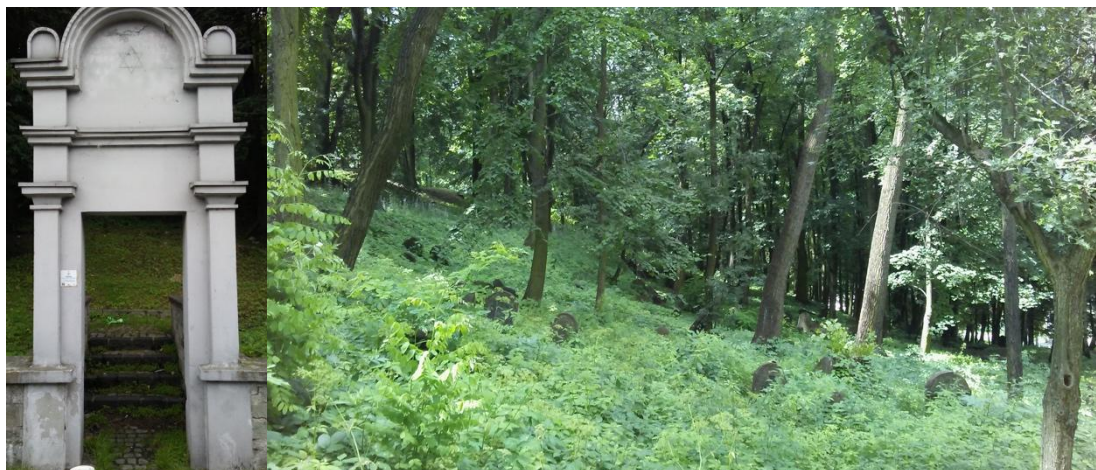
There were other researchers that we were introduced to along the way. They shared with us stories about the projects that were underway to uncover and restore the remnants of pre-war Poland. We were all students on this journey. As they talked we scribbling names on papers and into cell phones or took pictures and videos



In the town of Będzin we were given a tour of some of the restorations of the town. In particular we visited the Brama Cukermana (Cukerman's Gate)**** a restoration project started by Karolina and Piotr Jakowenko. Here we saw work being done to restore a small synagogue, Synagoga Misrachi which had its first minyan after 70 years in August 2013.



We visited the Café Jeruzolima*****, founded by Adam Szydłowski (in the Family home Lemel) – a coffee shop, museum and gallery. Cafe Jerusalem is the place where you can go back in time, a place where you drink coffee, eat a good cheese cake, and see a lot of archival documents and objects from pre-war Jewish Będzin. Young residents of Będzin are given lessons in Jewish history, and once a month a concert is held with klezmer music.



Hidden in this field through the entrance on the left are the burial stones of hundreds of families that need to be reclaimed. This is a most important projects in the area because it could lead to people from all over the world discovering their families. If you'd like more information you can contact: Darek; project leader *****

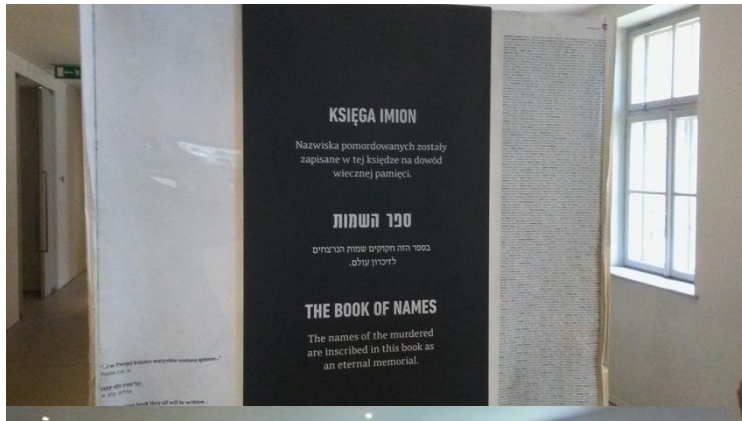
3

Our larger mission was to commemorate the people – members of our families, who were the victims of Nazi aggression. At each town we were greeted by representatives of the local government. Together we talked about the events that had occurred at this site. Family members of victims from the town or ghetto we visited were honored to put a wreath and light candles. Then we all said Kaddish.

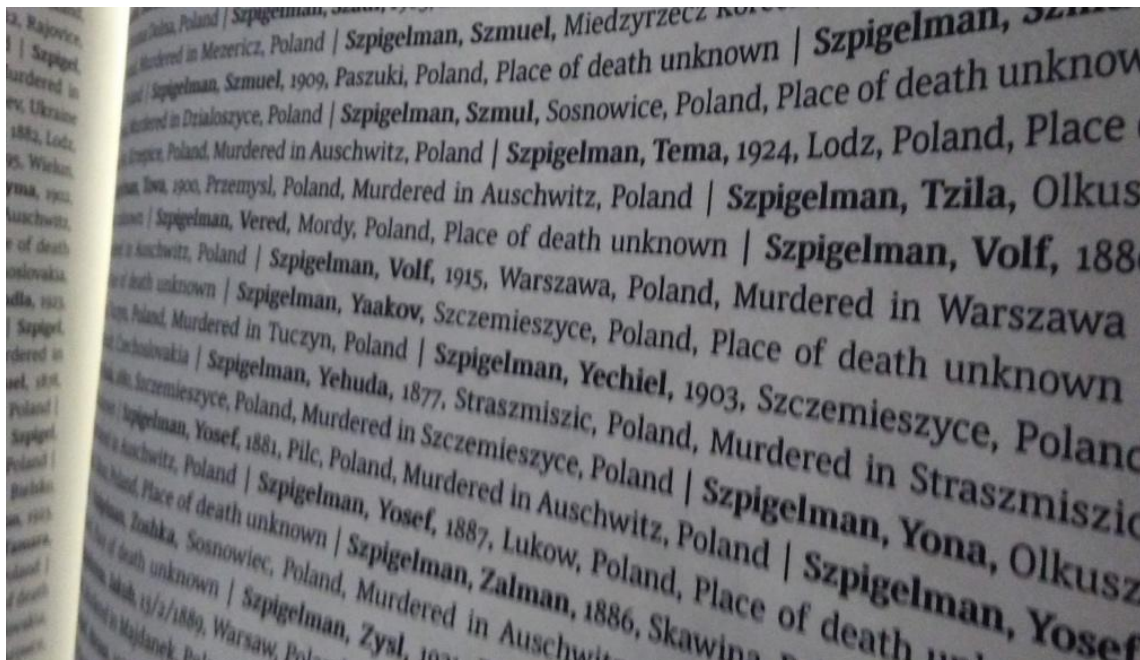


Top left to bottom right: Kozuch Memorial; Sosnowiec; Będzin’s Ghetto Heroes Memorial; Będzin Great Synagogue Memorial; Czeladź Jewish Cemetery Memorial; and Srudula Ghetto Memorial.

We circled around from one town to another each with a ceremony.....but all roads lead to the place of horror that we all instinctively knew as the place of death and torture, Auschwitz-Birkenau. We arrived there early in the morning for an 8 AM appointment. I didn’t really grasp that thousands of people a day come through there. We toured from room to room and finally arrived at the room with the record of all of the names.



We are The People of the Book, so there was a great symbolism of seeing our family names in this volume.



I was shocked to see how many Szipigelman names there were: four pages! This was page 13,923.

We continued on to Birkenau. Here we saw one of the cattle cars into which people were loaded. (My great-grandparents, Wolf and Sura Rivka Szpigelman, were two such people. They were transported in late October 1942 across Europe from Belgium in Transport XIV. For three days they were tortured – standing most of the time in deplorable and inhumane conditions, only to be marched into a crematorium upon their arrival on October 26, 1942.)



There was a poignant story about defiance in the face of death associated with this car which was given as a gift by a wealthy family. The story was that of a simple man – the grandfather of the donor, who stood up to the Nazi’s. He resisted them when they tried to take away his tefillin as he left the rail car.....they shot him dead.

Why would someone risk their lives for their tefillin? My great grandfather, Wolf Szpigelman, also held onto his Jewish identity. He wouldn’t cut off his beard – even when confronted. And as he explained to his grandson, my Uncle Simon, about the German soldiers he gave us a clue as to what the Jewish People hold on to so dearly....”they will try to take everything from us, even our neshume (soul).....Remember, no one can take away that what is in your head...in your mind, that what you know, that what you feel, all that what makes you a mensch.”
(From *At the Edge of the Abyss: A Childhood in World War II*; By Simon Spiegelman)



Some photos and a poem recovered from a suitcase and on display in a gallery at Birkenau.



Eventually we arrived at the place where the crematoriums stood. There bombed out ruins lay in a heap on the ground. This was the final resting place of our families from Zaglembe. Here in these surrounding fields were the ashes of our collective ancestors.....We laid a wreath and lit candles. Then many of us recited the names of those that we had come to remember. I mentioned my mother's paternal and maternal grandparents: Wolf Szpigelman and Sara Rywka Kolin Szpigelman; and Berl Kanerek and Machela Kolin Kanerek..... We said Kaddish.....Some of us cried, others just felt the solemnity of the moment.



All of us knew that this was the climax of the story that we had come to learn about and sanctify with our presence and our words. As we left a great weight had been lifted off of us.

4

Throughout these bigger missions in the pauses between we met on the field of life. As we sat on the bus or toured around the towns and villages, our guides shared stories and jokes that we could all connect to culturally. And we talked to each other learning about our families and possibly making a connection – in the world of Jewish geography.



Here David and Karolina, our wonderful guides talk to us about the Old Town in Warsaw



In the evening we met ate dinner together. We listened to folk songs from long ago, sung in Yiddish and Polish. This is the sinews of our collective knowledge, the customs and the traditions that weave their way through our conscious and unconscious selves. And through these interactions we became as if we were one. Joined by a recognition that we are rooted in a shared past of family and community, truth and compassion.

Finally, throughout our journey we were experiencing Jewish life today in Poland. This came most to life in the larger cities that we visited. In Krakow we saw an exhibit on Judaism since WW 2. We ate in kosher restaurants, and visited the local JCC.



The Nozyk Synagogue Sign of Jewish Resistance Gwozdziec Synagogue Reconstruction- Polin Mus. I.L. Peretz Warsaw Cem.

And in Warsaw we visited the only synagogue that survived the war, learned about the Jewish Resistance, explored a thousand years of Jewish history at the remarkable Polin Museum and toured the Jewish Cemetery where graves of some of the most renowned Jewish people like the writer I. L. Peretz are located.

6

As we returned to our homes across the globe and the hundreds of dots of memories grew in perspective, I for one, could imagine, given the growing interest in things Jewish, and the return of some aspects of Jewish life in some quarters, that if circumstances were right there could be a revival of Jewish life in Poland. After all, a fire, as destructive as it is, does not destroy the roots. And those roots of Jews in Poland go back.....

In fact, this is not a totally far out idea. In *Krakow we went to an exhibit called **We Were, We Are and We Will Be** at the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow which is housed in **The Old Synagogue**. A collection of essays were put together into a book of the same title. In ones section titled *The Revival of Jewish Life in Krakow*, author Marta Duch-Dyngoszthe interviews young Jews about Jewish life today.*

Karolina, one of the interviewees, In answer to the question could there be a revival of Jewish life in Poland? said: "This is not entirely a revival, as it would imply a continuity which, I believe,

isn't there. Indeed, there are some thin threads that make links with the past, and we can try to pick them out (...), establish relations, discover old traditions, and it can surely be interesting to discover knowledge and tradition left (...) hidden somewhere, or forgotten, and there is nothing wrong in bringing them back; if people did not have their own family or community traditions, they can create them now, why not? I agree with the term "revival of Jewish life in Poland" (...)...The very act of speaking about the revival of Jewish life in Poland makes that revival happen, which is also very positive. And speaking of revival implies that there are conditions for it to take place. For example, people can (...) look for their family traditions or roots, they can admit to being Jewish, they can try to live a life that was once considered typical of a minority and hardly acceptable by society, and they can do it without fear of getting attacked. The revival does take place, even if it's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

(We Were, We Are, We Will Be, ; The Jewish Community of Krakow after 1945; Historical Museum of the City Of Krakow)

Epilogue

It is interesting to note that shortly before our trip to Poland, Ellie Wiesel, died. While we were in Poland the NATO Summit of 27 nations took place in Warsaw. And a few weeks after we left, Pope Francis came to the very places that we had visited. We know in Jewish history that when three things happen in a row there needs to be some pause for thought of the connection. Could it be that the juxtaposition of these three events might come to represent, the generation passing, the generation of today and the generation of tomorrow.



Rick Feldman, author, kneeling, with Rachel Rechnic, brother Ron and mom, Cecile Spiegelman Feldman, in Czeladź Cemetery

*World Zaglembe Organization : I just happened to Google Zaglembe earlier this year and in their newsletter was this story about a trip for July. Here is the link:

<http://www.zaglembe.org/en/>

** Jeffrey Cymbler has been tracing his roots in Zaglembe since 1983. In addition, to being the author of a book, The Cemetery of the Jewish Communities of Będzin and Czeladź Poland, he is the town leader for all the Zaglembe towns for Jewish Records Poland – Indexing (www.jri-poland.org). His email is: jcymbler@aol.com.

*** Jakub Czupryński is associated with the Polish Genealogical Society of America. They represent many people from across Poland who can help you to find information, and also deal with the multiple languages including Polish, Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew that are part of the chase. Here is a link. <http://pgsa.org/how-to/frequently-asked-questions/polish-researchers-and-guides/>. You can reach Jakub directly at j.czuprynski@gmail.com

**** Brama Cukerman Foundation Involved in restoration of Jewish landmarks in Będzin and surrounding towns, stories of Jewish heritage in the towns of Selesia and Zaglembe region and education on Anti Semitism and the Holocaust. They can be reached at bramacukermana@gmail.com and www.bramacukermana.com.

***** Café Cafe Jerusalem (in the Family home Lemel) – a coffee shop, museum and gallery. Cafe Jerusalem is the place where you can move in time, a place where you drink coffee, eat a good cheese cake, see a lot of archival documents and objects from pre-war Jewish Będzin. Once a month held with klezmer music and for the young residents of Będzin conducted lessons of Jewish history. Project Director is Adam Szydłowski working on history of Jewish in Zaglembe for many years, organizer of historical reconstructions, the discoverer of the House of Prayer Cukerman's, the House of Prayer Mizrachi and the publisher of the diary Rutka Laskier.

Contact Adam Szydłowski at: Jerozolima jonaBędzin@op.pl

Or go to the website at: <http://www.cafejerezolima.pl>

***** Darek. Archeologist whose subject is medieval period, but also preservation of local monuments – esp. cemeteries. He is involved in the preservation of a major cemetery in Będzin..... Rozmusowie <rozmusd@poczta.onet.pl. And for more info on Będzin Cemeteries: <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/poland/Będzin-katowickie.html> (also Darek recommended a friend who does local history. He was helpful in finding addresses of our family homes: Sławomir Witkowski switkowski2@interia.pl or switkowski2@wp.pl

***** Jarden Book Store, Krakow. Lucy and her husband have an extensive collection of Jewish Books and also provide drivers for local tours. We had a very good and interesting driver who took us around Dabrowa Gornichen, Sławków and Będzin. For four hours it cost us around \$140.00 American Dollars. Their e-mail is jarden@jarden.pl.

The website is <http://jarden.pl>

***** Jewish Historical Institute; Marta Mackowiak, Jewish Genealogy and Family Heritage Center; email: familyheritage@jhi.pl; website: www.jhi.pl

Other researchers of note:

*****Fred Frenkel is a very experienced genealogist he has helped my Uncle Simon Spiegelman do research on our family tree. He is a professor at a university in Munich, Germany and can be reached at genfred@arcor.de

*****Stanley Diamond: Executive Director, Jewish Records Indexing - Poland, Inc.
He is also a genealogist who can help you learn about a rare genetic trait: **beta-thalassemia genetic trait**The confidentiality refers to records that are still in the town civil records offices and covered by Polish privacy laws.

Stanley Diamond (Montreal ☎514-484-0100); smsdiamond@aol.com, www.diamondgen.org
Executive Director, Jewish Records Indexing - Poland, Inc.

www.jri-poland.org **Winner of 2014 IAJGS Award for Outstanding Contribution to Jewish Genealogy via the Internet**