

A "Memorial Day" In Staszow

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When Dr. Maciej Zarebski, chairman of the local cultural association, introduced me to the high school assembly in Staszow, a picturesque rural town of 20,000 in southern Poland, he described me as "a native American whose cantor father once sang in the synagogue here, and whose grandfather carved smoking pipes in a little shop in the Market Square."

I was at the high school to inaugurate my annual "memorial lecture" in my parents' ancestral *shtetl*, in memory of my thirty lost Staszow relatives consumed by the Nazi inferno in World War II.

These "memorial lectures" with open discussions afterwards is my effort to get the young people of Staszow to share with me a remembrance of their town's 5000 vanished Jews who once made up half the population. The "memorial day" in the town's two high schools is scheduled on the anniversary of the day when the Nazis extinguished the life of the 400 year-old Staszow Jewish community. With the help of Dr. Zarebski, a civic-minded young physician, I invite a historian, eyewitness or ordinary citizen to speak.

In my recent address (with a Polish translator at my side) I told the youngsters about Staszow's righteous gentiles, 'true Christians' like Maria Szczecinska, a widowed railway clerk with five children, who risked her life and her family's lives to conceal fifteen Jews in the railroad station for two years. But I also pointed out there were other townspeople who betrayed, robbed and even murdered their Jewish neighbors. The high schoolers listened with rapt attention. I wondered how often, if ever, this subject had been publicly discussed.

I expressed my painful sadness at the desecrated, abandoned Jewish cemetery where my four grandparents and other venerable forebears lie. Especially anguishing, I said, was the unmarked mass grave in a scrub-covered hollow holding over 500 victims of Nazi barbarism, massacred on the day of deportation. During the Occupation the Nazis removed most of the tombstones for use as paving blocks in the muddy Market Square. When I appealed to the students as to what could be done to restore the derelict burial ground, I was deeply moved by their response.

"What would you like us to do?" one studious-looking youth asked.

"There ought to be a monument and a protecting fence," volunteered a dark-haired girl.

A husky, square-jawed youngster stood up. "We will do something about it," he pledged firmly.

For years I had contemplated

some practical way to memorialize Staszow's martyred Jews, including my uncles, aunts and cousins I had never known. I took on this self-assigned duty as a "descendant" of Staszow, born fortunately in America because my restless parents emigrated before the Nazi scourge.

As a child listening to the anecdotal *shtetl* yarns and nostalgic recollections of my parents and their reminiscing *landsmen* gathered in our house, I secretly longed to have been a part of their closely-knit little world. Tucked away in the parochial Polish countryside, the vibrant Staszow Jews supported a spectrum of credos from Chassidic orthodoxy to radical political movements; social activities from orchestral concerts to soccer leagues. With *simchas* communally shared, misfortunes mutually lamented, their society took pride in a caring intimacy, in the midst of poverty and recurrent adversity.

Growing up in a more alienated, indifferent metropolitan America, I often wistfully imagined an idealized lifestyle in the little Polish *shtetl*. How I wished I could see it one day!

On the platform of the high school this past "memorial day" I felt a strange sense of belonging. It was as if the spirits of all those departed kin had returned to their beloved *shtetl* through my presence here.

Among the questions raised in the discussion period was one by a pretty 17 year-old girl. "What's your opinion of the accusation that Polish people have anti-Semitism in their blood?"

I answered that Jews who had suffered from anti-Semitism in Poland were understandably bitter, and would probably always be so. But I believed it was just as wrong to condemn an entire nation as was anti-Semitism with its warped message of hate.

To another question, "Was I visiting any Jewish families in town?" (there have been no known Jews here since the War) I was at first astonished, but then — wasn't it a good sign when people were not so conscious of who was or wasn't a Jew?

While making the critical point of my address, that racism, intolerance and ignorance led to the horrors of the Holocaust, I studied the faces of my young audience. I wondered what meaningful effect, if any, my words might have on them.

The applause abated. The students rose to leave. The school principal assured me that many students would discuss the subject with their parents that night. A smiling boy and girl approached and presented me with bouquets of spring flowers. I carried the flowers to the devastated cemetery and placed these symbols of hope on the broken remnant of a tombstone, the only one I could find.