

A Polish Town Remembers Its Jews

By Jack Goldfarb

A unique and poignant "Day of Remembrance" took place recently in Staszow, an ancient market town of 18,000 residents in southeastern Poland. Hundreds of townspeople, officials and schoolchildren participated in a daylong series of events publicly honoring the town's 5,000 Jews deported to their death in the Holocaust, exactly 50 years earlier on the same day. No Jews have lived in Staszow since.

Ceremonies began at midday with the dedication of a 10 foot-high Memorial monument on the Jewish Cemetery, a bleak lonely site, desecrated and abandoned for half a century. Later in the day, the town's historical museum inaugurated a special "Jewish Section." In the evening poetry readings and a Judaic art exhibition preceded an open forum discussion of the years of the Holocaust. At the day's close, a history textbook on Staszow's Jews, published to mark the occasion, was distributed to hundreds of schoolchildren, libraries and bookshops. The book detailed the story of the achievements, hardships and ultimate tragedy of the 400 year-old Jewish community whose existence ended with the Nazi deportation Aktion on November 8, 1942, remembered as "Czarna Niedziela" "Black Sunday."

Highlight of the Day of Remembrance for me in this town of my ancestral roots was the unveil-

ing of the concrete and sandstone Memorial monument (in the realization of which I played a part). When the Mayor, a young schoolgirl and I pulled away the draped white covering and a huge Star of David appeared above the words (in English, Hebrew and Polish) exhorting us to remember, my tears flowed freely in knowing that this "eulogy" in stone for those long-lost innocents had at last been proclaimed in their beloved *shtetle*, their familiar *heim*.

The gathering of about 100 people at the cemetery listened in attentive silence as a Polish-Jewish poet, Alexander Rozenfeld, and I recited prayers and psalms in Hebrew and in Polish translations. Flowers were laid on the monument, candles were lit and speeches made.

To the audience I said that although I had been born and raised thousands of miles away in America, I had been haunted for years by the harrowing vision of the deportation in Staszow's Market Square on that distant frosty November morning. The scene had been vividly described to me after the War by one of the few survivors. The Nazis were shooting Jews at random to terrorize the assembled throng, among whom wore at least twenty of my near relatives, uncles, aunts, cousins.

But whenever I pictured that nightmarish tableau, I said, I

heard most distinctly, resonating above the sound of gunfire and children's screams, the defiant voice of my elderly, legendary Aunt Malka shouting to the Germans: 'Know that your defeat is near... Those who tried to destroy the Jewish people, were themselves Destroyed...' These were the last words of Aunt Malka, shot dead in the Market square.

When the monument ceremony ended, the poet and I, the only Jews present, were sought out by many townspeople expressing sympathetic sentiments which I felt had been unspoken for years. Under the Communist regime such remembrance occasions were scarcely encouraged. More than a few older persons told of Jews they had tried to help during the Nazi occupation. Others reminisced about their Jewish neighbors, or recalled the compassionate Jewish doctor who had so caringly treated their children's illnesses. Those townsfolk with less kindly feelings toward Jews, were unlikely, of course, to have been present today.

In the newly-opened Jewish Section of the museum, scores of photographs, documents and remnants of Judaica, collected by Dr. Maciej Zarebski, 40 year-old director of the Staszow Cultural Society, displayed a sketchy portrayal of the once-thriving Jewish community which comprised half the town's pre-Holocaust population. "At least two generations have grown up here knowing very little of the Jewish way of life, the Jewish communal institutions and the important contributions they made to our town," said Zarebski, standing in the midst of the exhibits.

A pathologist by profession and the editor of the local newspaper, Dr. Zarebski has devoted considerable time and effort to researching the history of Staszow's Jews. He authored the textbook published this day.

In reporting Staszow's Day of Remembrance, the Polish regional media gave it high praise. Radio Kielce called it "a pioneer event in developing improved Polish-Jewish relations." Krakow Television cited the occasion as "a splendid example of cordial Polish-Jewish understanding. Much was to be learned from this excellently-organized special event."

Malka, Where Are You?

At the close of the "Day of Remembrance" ceremonies in the Staszow Museum, a handful of elderly men and women shyly approached me to speak nostalgically of earlier times before the War and their former Jewish friends and neighbors. Mrs. Leokadia Cias, a quiet-spoken middle-aged woman from the nearby city of Kielce, told me she had come especially to seek my aid in trying to locate a Jewish child her parents had hidden in her home during the Holocaust. Mrs. Cias' father and mother had taken in the 8 year-old girl, Malka



Jack Goldfarb (left) and Alexander Rozenfeld at unveiling of memorial monument on 50th anniversary of deportation of the 5000 Jews of Staszow.

Judkiewicz, born of Jewish parents in the tiny village of Bogoria, near Staszow. Giving her the name of "Janina Mazurkiewicz," the Mazurkiewicz family had her baptized to conceal her true identity. Malka/Janina was cared for as one of their own family for two years, from 1943 to 1945. In late 1945, after the war ended, a woman accompanied by an armed soldier, knocked on the Mazurkiewicz' door. She presented a document authorized by the Jewish Religious Council of the city of Lodz stating she was the Jewish child's aunt and had the right to reclaim the now 10 year-old Malka Judkiewicz.

The Mazurkiewicz family with heavy heart gave up the girl whom they had grown to love dearly. They waited anxiously for months to hear from her. Eventually a letter came, written by Malka/Janina from an orphanage in France. Apparently the aunt in Poland was unable to look after the girl and had sent her to France. More correspondence followed occasionally, but then late in 1947 came a letter from a different orphanage in France. A few months later a postcard arrived from Paris, on which she had reverted to her original name, Malka. After that, nothing was ever heard from her again.

Inquiries sent to France by the family revealed both orphan homes and their archives no longer existed. The Mazurkiewicz parents passed away, but their daughter, Leokadia Cias, now living in Kielce, continued searching and hoping to find Malka someday. Through the years she had picked up "Information" that Malka had gone to Australia.

I offered to help Mrs. Cias in her search, although I knew the task was almost impossible. Rabbi Michael Schudrich, of New York, now based in Poland for the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, likewise heard Mrs. Cias' story at the Museum and also promised to help. Both Rabbi Schudrich and I took sets of photocopies of the letters Malka had written from France in 1946-1947.

Back in New York, I contacted friends in Israel, asking them to search records for Malka Judkiewicz' possible immigration to there in the late 1940's or anytime thereafter. Rabbi Schudrich knew the procedures for checking immigration records in the U.S.A. Neither of these efforts for information produced anything positive. Then I wrote to a Polish friend in Staszow asking him to try to secure a copy of Malka's birth certificate in Bogoria. He obtained it and sent it to me.

In the meantime, friends arrived in New York from Australia. When I told them of our search, they suggested I write it up as a story for Australia's leading Jewish newspaper. I did this, but no feedback came from Down Under.

At my desk late one night, once more I scrutinized Malka/Janina's correspondence and her birth certificate. Suddenly two pieces fit together. Malka's mother's maiden name on the certificate was "Fajga Mesberg," and on Malka's last postcard from Paris forty-five years ago was a return address, "c/o Mesberg."

Next morning I checked the Paris telephone directory in the French Consulate in New York, hoping there might be any Mesbergs in the 1993 edition. There was — one.

I passed the phone number on to Rabbi Schudrich in Warsaw, he contacted a friend in Paris. A phone call was made to a "Rene Mesberg." Yes, he was a cousin of Malka. And where was Malka? Alive and well, 57 years old, married to a French Jew and living in Paris.

When Mrs. Cias received the news in Kielce she was overjoyed. Malka is going to visit her in Poland this summer, and it promises to be a highly emotional reunion.

Jack Goldfarb is a free-lance writer who travels extensively and is based in New York. He is also involved in philanthropic projects in Poland, Nepal, India and South Africa.

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