

Redemption in a Graveyard

by Jack Goldfarb

Two summers ago, Anna Garczynska phoned me with startling news from her tiny village of Rytwiany, outside Staszów, Poland. Two skeletons had been found beneath a house undergoing reconstruction on Koscielna Street in Staszów.

Anna's son-in-law, Slawek, a Staszów policeman, had told her about the grim discovery. Her first thought was that maybe – just maybe – the skeletons might be the remains of any of my relatives lost in the Holocaust. The thought of this possibility gripped me with shock – and hope. Our family had lost 35 kin – uncles, aunts, cousins. To find any traces of them now, 60 years after they presumably perished in Belzec or Treblinka, would be nothing short of a miracle.

Anna Garczynska's family and I have kept in close contact for the past ten years since I first met them when I began restoring the Jewish cemetery in Staszów. Anna's mother was Leokadia Kawalec, a "Righteous Person" honored by Yad Vashem, for helping to save eight Staszów Jews. Leokadia has never forgotten witnessing the Death March of the 5000 Staszów Jews as they were mercilessly driven from the town.

I thanked Anna for the phone call and asked her to keep me posted about the skeletons. Several days later, the Staszów police filed their report: the skeletons – that of a man of about 40 years and an early teenager of uncertain gender -- bore no signs of criminal violence. Their deaths occurred most likely during the years of Nazi Occupation, 1939-1944. The report surmised they died of starvation or suffocation under the house. With these details, the police were closing the "case" and preparing to "dispose" of the remains, in the local "Potter's Field."

But the slim thread of hope that the skeletons could be that of my relatives, and the strong likelihood that the two unfortunate souls were Jewish persons in hiding under the house, motivated me to intervene. I contacted the Staszów Police and insisted that DNA tests be made.

The local forensic physician agreed to my request and, after Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, gave his halachic sanction (Jewish law normally forbids "mutilation" of human remains), Dr. Grosicki, removed several teeth from the skeletons.

I had already asked the good people at the Biology Department in University College, London, whether they could do the genetic testing for me. (I had once participated in their genetic study of *Cohanim*). Their reply was that if the London Beth Din also approved – as the skeletons were presumed to be of Jewish persons – the lab would do the work and, generously, waive any fees.

I dared to hope that these two skeletons could be that of my Uncle Aron and one of his children. Aron was my mother's brother, the youngest of nine siblings. He had had two children – a 14 year-old son, Chaskell, and a 10 year-old daughter, Yehudit. I never knew definitively what fate befell them.

Born in the USA, I had never personally known any of my Staszów relatives. But the fascinating stories and characteristics of many of them, as told by my parents, made them as real as if they had sat around our own dining table as I grew up in West Philadelphia.

Aron had been a "war hero" who, after serving several years conscripted in the Russian Czar's Army, managed to escape (in the chaos of the Russian Revolution) and trek hundreds of miles home, after the family thought he had surely been killed in battle. After the Holocaust, the story that had reached us in Philadelphia

was that when the deportation train carrying the Staszów Jews had slowed for a curve, Aron, daring and impulsive, had leaped from the cattle car, but had been shot dead by the Gestapo guards on the roof.

Although Uncle Aron Wolman and one of his children matched closest to the skeletons' estimated ages, others of my lost relatives also fitted those age groups. I swabbed the inside of my cheek and sent my DNA sample off to the London lab.

The wait for results was a long one. The London University laboratory had a busy year. The results took almost two years. The answer was negative. The skeletons were not my kin.

Nevertheless, I felt obliged to give these two anonymous mortals a decent burial. The two sets of remains had been in the custody of the Staszów Town Hospital for those two years.

Together with a friend, Andrzej Wawrylak, a member of the Staszów Town Council, I went to the hospital morgue and presented the document requesting the release of the skeletons to me for burial.

The clerks on duty calculated the arithmetic on paper and came up with the news that I owed exactly 38,000 Polish Zlotys (about \$800.US). My abrupt question, "For what?" elicited the reply: "For refrigeration and storage of human remains for two years – including cost of electricity."

My impulse reaction was to respond with, "You know what? You bury the skeletons!"

But then I thought – whoever these tragic people were and for whatever they had suffered, they did not deserve to be indecorously cast into a nameless grave in Potter's Field, their identity lost forever.

But 38,000 Zlotys also seemed extortionate. My friend, Mr. Wawrylak stepped into the breach. He spoke on the phone to the Director of the morgue, asserting that I would not pay the sum demanded.

"How much will he pay?" the Director negotiated with Mr. Wawrylak. I offered \$200. and the "deal" was quickly sealed. The money was "donated" to the hospital. A sad comment on what amounted to a repugnant ransoming of the dead.

We transported the skeletons to the Cemetery and made arrangements for the digging of a grave.. But, according to Jewish law no other human remains must be knowingly disturbed by the burial of another.

To help in this matter, Alex Wasowicz, the young assistant to Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, had traveled the 250 kilometers down from Warsaw to Staszów. Alex had brought along two hollow aluminum prongs which he used as "divining rods" to determine a place in this 183 year-old cemetery where no one else was buried.

As Alex stalked about the burial ground with his two aluminum rods, they continually crossed over each other indicating the presence of human remains. Under an overhead canopy of tall acacia trees, Alex suddenly stopped in his tracks. "A very heavy presence here," he said quietly. "Something unusual..." The prongs had locked firmly on to each other...

And then I knew.

On that fateful day in November 1942 when the Jews of Staszów stood in long rows in the town square awaiting their fate, the Nazis and their Lithuanian mercenaries shot dead dozens of people at random to intimidate the massed community. Later, a group of able-bodied Jewish men were ordered to hastily bury

the victims in a mass grave in the cemetery. The men were warned not to speak to each other as they went about their gruesome task.

But one of those gravediggers, Mory Rosenzweig, survived the war. When he visited me in New York many years ago he told me he had managed to sink an iron pipe in the ground to mark the site of the mass grave. Mory drew me a rough map indicating its location.

On my frequent trips to Staszów, I searched in vain for the iron pipe. Nor was Mory's map, salvaged from his memory 50 years later, helpful. Time and the elements had altered the terrain. No landmark grove of trees existed. A cluster of withered stumps may or may not have been the vanished grove.

* * *

After Alex's discovery, I pored over the dog-eared map once more. Several clues this time seemed to confirm Alex's "divining" evidence – vestigial traces of an eroded hillock... remnants of a crumbling stone wall.

I asked Alex to double-check the site with the aluminum prongs. He did. No question about it, he said, this is the "heaviest" site in the cemetery.

Sixty years later, we obviously found these martyred townspeople, and next November, we will honor them with prayers and a memorial stone.

For me, they are not all nameless victims. In this grave lies my blind Uncle Herszel who emerged from his hiding place on that fateful day to mournfully chant biblical verses until a Lithuanian mercenary murdered this gentle soul with a bullet through his head.

And in this grave lies my heroic aunt, Chava Malkeles, a gutsy septuagenarian, who before they shot her, defiantly shouted to the Germans that the Jews who had survived all their oppressors throughout history, would ultimately triumph over Hitler too.

We lowered the two skeletons found in Koscielna Street, wrapped in prayer shawls, into the clayish earth. At the edge of the narrow pit offering these two anonymous souls a permanent resting place at last, we recited the time-hallowed words of the Kaddish prayer... "Yitkadal, v'itkadash sh'may rabbo..."

Jack Goldfarb's previous articles in the *Kielce-Radom SIG Journal* about Staszów are "A Kaddish Deferred" in II:3 (Summer 1998), pages 13-18; "A 'Memorial Day' in Staszów" in III:4 (Autumn 1999), pages 30-31; and "The Stones of Staszów" in VII:3 (Summer 2003), pages 21-22. Also see the recent article about his efforts to restore the Staszów Jewish cemetery in the New York newspaper *The Jewish Week* of 5/16/2003: "Saving Cemeteries Here And Abroad".

Jack Goldfarb has been writing about travel for over 30 years. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and many other publications. He visits Eastern Europe frequently on Holocaust Remembrance efforts. His email address is <jacsim@juno.com>.