

DABROWA ON MY MIND

Michael Nevins

Virtual talk given on June 17, 2026 to high school students in Dabrowa Bialostocka with live translation by Bartosz Duszynski from Forum for Dialogue.

For the first half of my long life, I'd never heard the name of the small town in Czarist Russia from where my paternal grandparents emigrated during the 1890s. In fact, my awareness of Dabrowa only began in the mid-1980 with a casual suggestion that I made to my three teenage children that it might be an interesting project if *they* constructed a family tree — genealogy was just becoming popular way back then — but they replied that if I thought it would be so interesting, then why don't *I* do it? So I did.

I began by asking my parents what they knew about their own parents origins, but both admitted that they knew nothing — nor did they seem to care. After all, they were born in America so why bother about the bad old days? And if their parents had ever spoken about the past at all, like as not it was in Yiddish which their children didn't understand. By then, my father's parents, Haskel Neviadomsky and Celia Zaban, were long gone, but there was an elderly cousin of theirs, Phillip Sidransky, who also grew up in Dabrowa and now lived in Miami Beach.

I figured that he'd probably remember a lot so I arranged to visit him when we next were in Florida and when we met, cousin Phillip had a great deal to say. I learned from him that I was named after my great-grandfather Moishe Aaron Zaban who never came to America and was buried in Dabrowa. He also told me that the town's name meant "oak forest" and that really caught my attention because at that same time my family was living in a section of River Vale, New Jersey that's also called Oak Forest. I practiced medicine there for more than four decades and it's where my three children grew up — now they're all married with children of their own and two of my seven grandchildren are getting married this summer.

Not only did Phillip Sidransky know a great deal about my family's roots but also about the local Jewish community's history because he'd been a school teacher there until he came to America in about 1921. I asked him whether anyone had ever written any of this information down — and, if not, that *he* should. He sighed and said that he was too old — then about 80 — and suggested that *I* do it. Well that sounded ridiculous, but as I thought more about it, I reasoned that if I didn't than who would? So I agreed to give it a try.

Phillip Sidransky had been president of the shtetl's *landsmanshaft* organization (burial society) and he gave me several names to call and I communicated with many of them, even visited a few. One former resident of Dabrowa whom I interviewed at his home in Brooklyn, showed me a personal treasure — it was a remembrance of his home that he'd painted on a piece of cardboard shortly after he'd arrived in America — on one side was his family's cottage and on the other side he'd painted Dabrowa's synagogue. He was no Chagall, but what astonished me was that the sky was blue and the grass green. Why was I astonished? Because before that, all my visual images of shtetl life were somber in brown or black colors, But now I realized that the sun sometimes shone brightly in Dabrowa, that real people once lived relatively normal lives there, and it was there where my grandparents met and fell in love as teenagers — so I decided that I'd have to rethink my stereotypes.

When my *yizkor* (memorial) book, *Dubrowa. Memorial to a Shtetl*, was published in 1982, I became the town's unofficial Jewish historian without ever having visited the place. But that was remedied about a dozen years later when I was invited to participate in a dedication ceremony of the newly restored Jewish cemetery. It seems two young women, the Schlacter sisters, fled Dabrowa just before the start of World War II and settled in the United States. Now in their eighties they said that they wanted to smell the sweet air of their home town one last time, but when they revisited were appalled by the terrible condition of the Jewish cemetery where their ancestors and mine were buried. They raised money to build a surrounding wall and erect a monument and in 1995 a small group of us descendants gathered for a dedication cemetery. We stayed only a few hours and that was my first visit to the town from where my grandparents had come a hundred years earlier when about 40% of the town were Jewish. It was in Dabrowa where they fell in love but it was in New York that they were buried among hundreds of their former Jewish neighbors in Dabrowa

After that remarkable experience, I rarely thought again about Dabrowa until, about two decades later in 2015, I received an e-mail invitation from Dorota Budzinska to return to speak at a history remembrance day. It seems that when she had first come to Dabrowa, she too was troubled by the poor condition of the cemetery — as she once wrote it was like a personal affront to her and she decided to do something about it.— Indeed that’s why we’re meeting today. It seems that Dorota had read my book and, of course I agreed to her invitation. On my revisit in 2016 I brought along one of my sons and also a grandson. And I also invited a friend, Dr. Mark Podwal to join us because I knew that his mother had emigrated from Dabrowa in the 1920s when she was a child. Mark happens to be a famous artist and he was so moved by the visit that after returning home he produced a series of paintings that were based on the trip and Polish-Jewish relationships — and then about two years later he invited me to join him when he returned to Poland and Dabrowa in order to exhibit and even donate some of his pictures.

I confess that when I prepared for that first school program, I rather naively— and arrogantly — thought that I’d go and teach these locals a thing or two about history — but I’m sure that I learned far more from them than they did from me. When we visited the Jewish cemetery, I was amazed when one student held up an enlarged photo from my book of the great-grandfather whom I never knew, and spoke about this man who was buried there. During my trips to Dabrowa, I met many Poles who seemed eager to learn about their town’s long lost Jewish community. Also on each of my visits I met Tomek Wiesniewski, the preeminent historian of Jewish affairs in the Bialystok region, and we also visited several places of Jewish interest and I became familiar with the excellent educational activities of the splendid organization known as Forum for Dialogue.

During our trip in 2016, when Mark Podwal and I spoke at the school, our translator was Bialystok-born Elzbieta Smolenska with whom I continued to remain in touch and we’ve done several projects together. One of them concerned the official title of that program in 2016 which I learned was, in translation. “Reading Ashes” Those words seemed curious so I googled them and learned that they referred to a collection of more than twenty poems about the Holocaust that had been written shortly after the war by a Polish writer Jerzy Ficowski. With great difficulty I located an English translation and was shocked by the title of one of them which was “Letter to Marc Chagall.” Now I really was curious — what did the famous painter have to do with any of this?

I even managed to meet the late poet's wife in Warsaw before I returned home but she didn't seem to know much about the origin of the poem. It's too long a long story for now, but the finale is that five years ago, when I was 85 years old, I produced a short documentary film about this poem in English translation and with my friend Elzbieta Smolenska reading one of the parts. Of course I'd never made a movie before but you've got to start some time - right?

If the average American thinks about Poland at all, it's probably about the terrible past more than the present, but during my four visits, I've also met members of the small but vibrant current Jewish community — now perhaps as many as 10,000 mostly living in Warsaw, Cracow and Lodz. Although no Jews remain in the Bialystok region, I've met Poles who were eager to learn from past mistakes and eager to build a more tolerant future. Three years ago for my last visit to Poland, I brought along several more of my children and grandchildren in order for them for them to share what I've been experiencing during the past half century. So two months ago, when my whole family gathered to celebrate my 90th birthday, our visits to Dabrowa were still much on everyone's minds.

These days I sometimes Zoom into programs aired by Forum for Dialogue that don't merely commemorate Jews as abstract numbers, but encourage learning about their lives and their contributions. It's often said that dialogue and building people-to-people trust strengthen mutual understanding. After all we are all human beings and should appreciate that "others" share many of the same values and aspirations as we do. In 2019 when Dorota was nominated for the prestigious POLIN Award for her activism, she said, "In an environment where a variety of nations and religions exist, it is vital to teach tolerance through joint activities and shared knowledge. Stereotypes, intolerance and indifference all stem from lack of knowledge." As Dorota says, let's learn from the past with an eye on the future.

I hope that someday each of you will have the opportunity to visit Western countries so that you can get to know first hand more about we so-called "others" " And if you do get to visit America, although I might not still be around to greet you, you'll find members of my children's and grandchildren's generation who will be eager to welcome and get to know you.

END





H. NORWID.





Forum
Dialogu.
Szkoła
Dialogu



