

DIGGING UP ROOTS

EXPLORING MY GRANDPARENT'S POLISH JEWISH PAST

MICHAEL NEVINS



THE AUTHOR AND HIS GRANDPARENTS AT JONES BEACH, SUMMER, 1941

BRONX BOY

Both of my paternal grandparents, Hyman Neviadomsky and Celia Zaban, were born in 1878 in a *shtetl* called Dabrowa (pronounced Dombrova and anglicized by the emigres as Dubrowa.) Back then the town was part of czarist Russia, midway between Bialystok and Grodno, but as a result of changing political boundaries, now it's located in northeastern Poland and officially called Dabrowa Bialostocka. In my grandparents' time, about three quarters of the citizens were Jews; now none of roughly 6,000 townspeople are Jewish.

My grandparents met in 1890 when as twelve year olds both came to *shul* to say *kaddish* for recently deceased parents. He was the son of a peddler while she came from a long line of tailors and before long Hyman was apprenticed to Celia's father Moishe Aaron - after whom I'm named. In 1896 at age eighteen, grandpa fled to America to avoid conscription in the Russian army and two years later his girlfriend joined him, fleeing from a stern step-mother. They married and settled in Brooklyn where they raised three sons and a daughter. I suspect that one day grandpa saw a street sign for Nevins Street and liked it because when he filled out his naturalization papers, he discarded his awkward surname in favor of the Yankee-sounding moniker "Nevins."

Grandpa had a small "gents" clothing store that was located under the El on Third Avenue at 84th Street. He was a man of few words but had a cheerful disposition. Grandma was a tiny woman, rarely seen outside the kitchen where she excelled at a limited menu of Jewish delicacies - I remember, without nostalgia, chopped liver, boiled chicken, *tzimmas*, stewed prunes. They moved to the Bronx near the Grand Concourse and joined a *landsmanshaft* of former Dabrowa natives who raised money for members in need and for relatives back in the old country. They all attended a fancy annual banquet and in death most were buried in the same section of massive Beth David cemetery in Elmont, Queens.

My father Samuel, the third born, was a dentist whose offices were in the Yorkville section at Third Avenue and 85th Street. My mother Belle was glad to have escaped her culturally deprived life in Newark and, although a graduate of New Jersey College for Women and a fine pianist, she seemed content in the traditional role of housewife. We lived in a 6th floor apartment at 1535 Undercliff Avenue in the west Bronx where my older brother David and I shared a bedroom that overlooked the Harlem River. Our family was relatively unaffected by World War II and my youthful memories are of family vacations, summer camps, private high school (Fieldston) and college (Dartmouth.) I followed in my brother's footsteps toward a medical career and met my future wife Phyllis Brower during my second year at Tufts medical school in Boston. We married the next year and before long began produced three wonderful children. After two years at an air force base in Roswell, New Mexico, I finished cardiology training at Mount Sinai and then got busy establishing a medical practice in northern New Jersey.

With all of that as introduction, the purpose of what follows here is *not* to discuss my happy but rather conventional personal narrative. Rather, the focus will require a wider lens, as I concentrate on the Jewish community's experience in Russia and then Poland both in the past and the present.

ROOTS

In about 1976 when I was entering my 40s, I read the journalist Alex Haley's new novel *Roots*. That popular book about black history and the subsequent TV series of the same name inspired people of many backgrounds to explore their own family's genealogies. I remember suggesting to my teen-age children that it might be fun for *them* to construct a family tree, perhaps as a school project. They rolled their eyes as if to say, if it would be so much fun, why don't I do it myself? Hmm. Why not indeed? My parents were no help. Both were born here and their parents had never discussed their lives in the old country with them. Nor were they interested.

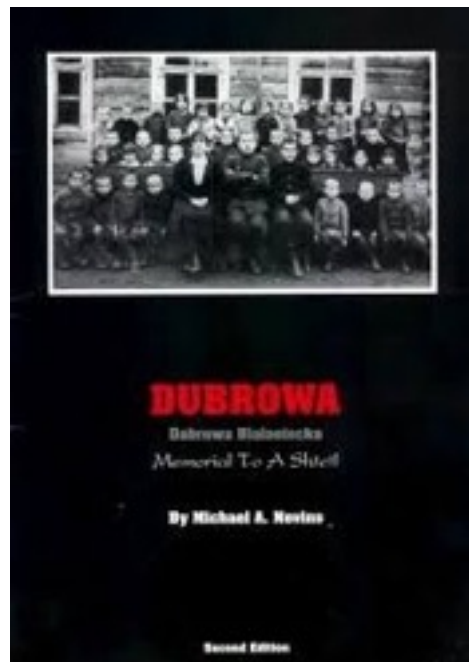
My grandparents were long gone (Hyman in 1962, Celia in 1966), but then I got lucky. I learned that my father's father had a cousin, Philip Sidransky, who grew up in the same *shtetl* and now lived in Miami Beach. We happened to be planning a family vacation in Florida so I contacted cousin Philip, arranged a meeting and made sure to bring a tape recorder. Philip was frail but had a scholarly and retentive mind, and he was eager to talk. As a young man he'd been a high school teacher in Dabrowa but fled to North America in 1921, fearing being drafted into Poland's new army. (At the end of World War I, Poland had regained its independence after 123 years of Russian rule.) In New York City Philip became president and later the longtime secretary of Dabrowa's *landsmanshaft* so he knew where the members lived and where most of the deceased were buried - that was easy: all together in Beth David cemetery. He explained that there were dozens of towns and villages named Dabrowa, which means "oak grove," and that caught my attention because we lived in a section of suburban River Vale, NJ known as Oak Forest. Was the wheel coming full circle?

Cousin Philip explained that in the 1766 census about 400 Jews were living in Dabrowa and by 1900 their numbers had swelled to about 1,500. He told many interesting stories and when I asked whether anyone had ever written a history of the town, he replied in the negative. I suggested, "Why don't you do it?" He replied that he was too old (about age 80) and that I should do it! Me? What did I know? I was familiar with Anatevka, but that was a figment of Shalom Aleichem's imagination and Dabrowa was a real place. Still, the more I thought about this ridiculous idea, I came to appreciate that perhaps Philip was right. After all, the old-timers were dying off and if I didn't do it, who would? Time was running out and, yes, it might be fun.

Once having accepted Philip's suggestion, I decided to extend my research beyond the narrative of our family to that of Dabrowa's Jewish community by contacting members of the town's mutual benevolent society. The *landsmanshaftn* movement began in the late 19th century with the first wave of immigrants and by 1938 there were nearly 3,000 organizations in New York City with close to a million members. But as the immigrants died off, most societies became defunct - the next generation just didn't need them. Nevertheless, after the end of World War II more than 1,200 *landmanshaftn* published *yiskor bikhers* (memorial books) in order to preserve the history of their towns. In effect, this was their last great service, but if the intent was to memorialize and pass on the tradition, the result was unrealized because most of the books were printed in limited editions and written in Yiddish, an unfamiliar language to later generations. Also, they were flawed as historical documents because they relied on the faulty memories of multiple contributors and were written from a strictly local perspective; yet, what the *yizkor* books lacked in style and accuracy they made up in authenticity.

The *Chevra Beni Rabbi Menachem Anshei Dubrowa* had formed in New York City in 1892 and flourished for decades until, as its original members died or drifted away, the organization lost its vitality. By the time that I became interested there were only a few survivors or their children who met sporadically to administer the burial plots in two cemeteries. I felt a sense of obligation to contact surviving *landsmen* and visited a few who lived nearby and, after more than a year of limited returns from my inquiries, letters began to arrive from former Dabrowa immigrants. The project's culmination came in January, 1982, when during a trip to Israel I had the good fortune to interview the town's last two survivors of the Holocaust period. Although my account was not intended to be a definitive historical document, sufficient material had accumulated to provide the essence of the town's past and at least my account would be written entirely in English.

Dubrowa. Memorial to a Shtetl was published in limited edition in the spring of 1982 and, as I suggested, "It's very ordinariness makes Dabrowa's story that of the typical shtetl, a microcosm of the Jewish experience in Russia-Poland." I distributed copies to family and members of the society as well as to various Jewish libraries and archives and thought that was the end of a



gratifying project. As it turned out, it was only the beginning. Indeed, just a few days after the book was printed, my wife and I were invited to a seder at the home of my friend and publisher Alvin Schultzberg. Another guest noticed a copy sitting on a table - literally "hot off the press." For years she'd been searching unsuccessfully for details about this same town where her husband's grandfather had lived, but no luck, and now right here was a book that contained a list of the town's Holocaust martyrs! Phyllis and I had the list translated from Yiddish after a visit to Yad Vashem and, sure enough, her husband's grandfather's name was included.

AN UNTENDED GRAVEYARD

In 1987 I was contacted by the former Schlachter sisters of Silver Springs, Maryland. Rena (Roncha) Holstein and Lilly (Leycha) Gritz had escaped Dabrowa shortly before the start of World War II. Their father was killed in a pogrom there in 1916 when Rena was an infant. Lilly was the first to immigrate but Rena didn't want to leave. Just days before the onset of World War II, her mother insisted that for safety the 23 year old join her older sister in America. Her brother's last words were, "Please don't forget my children." Sadly, they all were killed in the Holocaust but Rena and Lilly didn't forget, In 1988, nearly a half century after they'd left, as the sisters said, they needed to "smell the air" of their hometown again. However, when they visited along with several family members, they found no recognizable houses and were appalled by the bad shape of the cemetery, more from neglect than vandalism. Headstones were toppled over, underbrush was encroaching and teenagers were smoking, drinking and defiling the place.

The Schlachter sisters vowed to raise money (eventually about \$30,000) to have a protective stone wall built to encircle the cemetery with a locked entrance gate topped by a Jewish star and an appropriate monument. They arranged for a former high school friend, Jan Jarjecki, a Catholic still living in Dabrowa, to supervise the project and when the enclosure was completed, my wife and I joined a small international group and local officials in a moving rededication ceremony. It was held on June 27, 1995 and when it was my turn to speak, I remarked that the story of the Jews of Dabrowa was not only about death and despair but also about good times: "I think of my grandparents who as teenagers met and fell in love right here more than a century ago." I closed with these words:

Sometimes when I've visited our family graves in the cemetery in Queens where former Dabrowa natives are buried, my eyes have drifted upward to the descending airplanes which approach JFK airport. It happens that a main flight path runs directly over the Dabrowa society's plot. Next week when Phyllis and I return home, we will land at JFK and as we lookdown from the airplane window, we will be completing a symbolic linkage of these two Jewish cemeteries. I believe that my grandparents would have been pleased that we've made this connection and that somewhere they are smiling.

At the end of the ceremony I presented a copy of my memorial book to Jan Jarjecki, the man who had supervised the project. I told him, "Whether directly or indirectly, we all are children of Dabrowa who have come to mourn our loss and to celebrate our heritage. Your work in restoring this quiet memorial place has served to dignify the dead. Such is the act of a righteous man and for this we thank you." Rena died about seven months after that event and sister Lilly followed several years later. Little did I suspect that the *yizkor* book I gave to Jan might influence future events, but apparently some others must have read a Polish translation.



Lilly Gritz, Rena Holstein and Jan Jarjecki in front of the cemetery gate in 1995

READING ASHES

Twenty years passed and I rarely thought about Dabrowa until in October 2015 I received an e-mail message from a high school teacher there with an exciting invitation. Evidently Dorota Budzinska knew of my book and explained that she and her students were studying their town's Jewish history. They had been clearing the overgrown cemetery and now were planning a Jewish Culture Day to commemorate their former neighbors. Would I be willing to participate? How could I say no? So in May, 2016, accompanied by my son Ted and grandson Sam, I finally visited Dabrowa.

Dorota Budzinska who organized the project has limited command of English, but what follows here is a translation of a portion of her eloquent words when in 2019 she was nominated for the prestigious POLIN award that recognizes individuals who through their contributions have preserved the memory of the history of Polish Jews.

My first point of reference was the Jewish cemetery in my hometown of Lipsko. A curious place where I studied the "stones" with cryptic - yet fascinating for a child - symbols. I remember placing my hands against those carved on the headstones. Then there were some family secrets and talks of Jews hidden in the cellar of my grandparents' house. But first and foremost - it was the Jewish cemetery that drew my attention. The "little Jewish tombs" was how the cemetery was referred to... Then there is literature from the time of my school and university education when Shalom Ash and Isaac Bashevis Singer became my favorite writers....

Dabrowa's Jewish cemetery was like a silent reproach - although it was surrounded by a fence, it was a neglected and littered site. It took me a long time to reach a decision to change this state...I am a teacher and a pedagogue, so I am aware that my attitude, opinions and behavior have an impact on the youth I work with. I try to account for my activism so that young people "get it." I have to be authentic in whatever I say or do. For this reason, I made it clear that by studying the town's Jewish history I am also studying a history of our community, our "small homeland"; something that has passed, but continues to endure - not only in material form, but also in mentality. 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,



Dorota Budzinska and Jolanta Konstancuk at the Dabrowa cemetery

Before traveling to Poland, I received an official invitation from the mayor of Dabrowa which said that the program's title would be *Reading Ashes*. That meant nothing to me but when I googled those two words, I learned they referred to a collection of 27 poems on Holocaust themes that were written after the war by a young Pole by the name of Jerzy Ficowski. I'd never heard of him and it took a long time before I was able to locate an English translation. I learned that as a teenager Ficowski fought with the underground Home Army, participated in the Warsaw Uprising and was imprisoned for several months by the Nazis. He began writing poetry after the war ended, but under Soviet censorship his work wasn't published until 1979.



Jerzy Ficowski

When finally I could read Ficowski's poems in translation, I found them to be extremely powerful. One literary critic praised the poems as the most authentic and moving depictions of the Holocaust ever written by a non-Jew, or as Ficowski described himself, "I, their unburnt brother." In the book's first words, the poet expressed his despair: "I did not manage to save a single life. I did not know how to stop a single bullet" and what followed in 27 poems was his condemnation of Nazi crimes. Jerzy Ficowski also was a staunch defender of Roma (gypsies) and in his later years publicly denounced anti-Semitic Soviet policies. Indeed he contributed his whole life and work to promoting tolerance and building bridges between people of different nationalities and religions. I was surprised that I'd never heard of him.

On the last evening of that visit to Poland, I arranged to meet the late poet's wife Bieta at a cafe in Warsaw and, through her grandson's translation, was able to discuss her husband's work, including the very last poem in *Reading Ashes*, "Both Your Mothers," which told her own story. Bieta was born in the Warsaw ghetto and when she was just six months old her parents, realizing that no one would survive, arranged to have her smuggled out to safety. Baby Bieta was sedated, placed in a wood box with air holes that was placed on a construction truck, covered with bricks and then driven to the "Aryan side." Before the box was closed, a silver teaspoon with her name and birthdate inscribed on it was placed inside.

In effect, that spoon would serve as her birth certificate. A Catholic midwife, who delivered babies for Jewish women in hiding, adopted and baptized Bieta. She only learned about her origin accidentally when she was 17 years old. Bieta met Jerzy Ficowski when she was a university student in Warsaw and he was a member of the faculty and they married in 1968 when she was 26 and he was 44. In later life when Bieta Ficowska served as President of the Children of the Holocaust Association, she confided to that group:

I am trying to imagine what my young, 24 year old mother felt, when she gave away her child to strangers. She must have hoped that the child would survive. Even though I was too small to remember her, I shall never forget my Jewish mother. I would not recognize her face on a photograph, but I see her in my dreams.

Bieta Ficowska was one of about 2,500 Jewish children of the Warsaw ghetto who were rescued thanks to the courageous work of a Catholic nurse by the name of Irena Sendler who many years later was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. I thought that I knew a great deal about Holocaust history but was astonished that I'd never heard of these remarkable heroes? I concluded that although I had much to teach in Poland, I also had a lot to learn.

On the morning of the conference in Dabrowa, Dorotea sent a van to pick us up at our hotel in Warsaw. As on my previous trip, during the more than three hour drive I was impressed that the landscape was quite attractive with neat villages scattered among pine forests and rather prosperous appearing farms. The formal part of the program was held in the crowded auditorium of a modern school with flags of Poland, the United States and Israel displayed. There were lengthy greetings in Polish by various officials before it finally was my turn to speak. I'd been advised to avoid controversial subjects because the political situation was sensitive so I composed about a ten minute talk and submitted the text in advance so that the Polish translator, Elzbieta Smolenska, could alternate reading paragraphs with me.

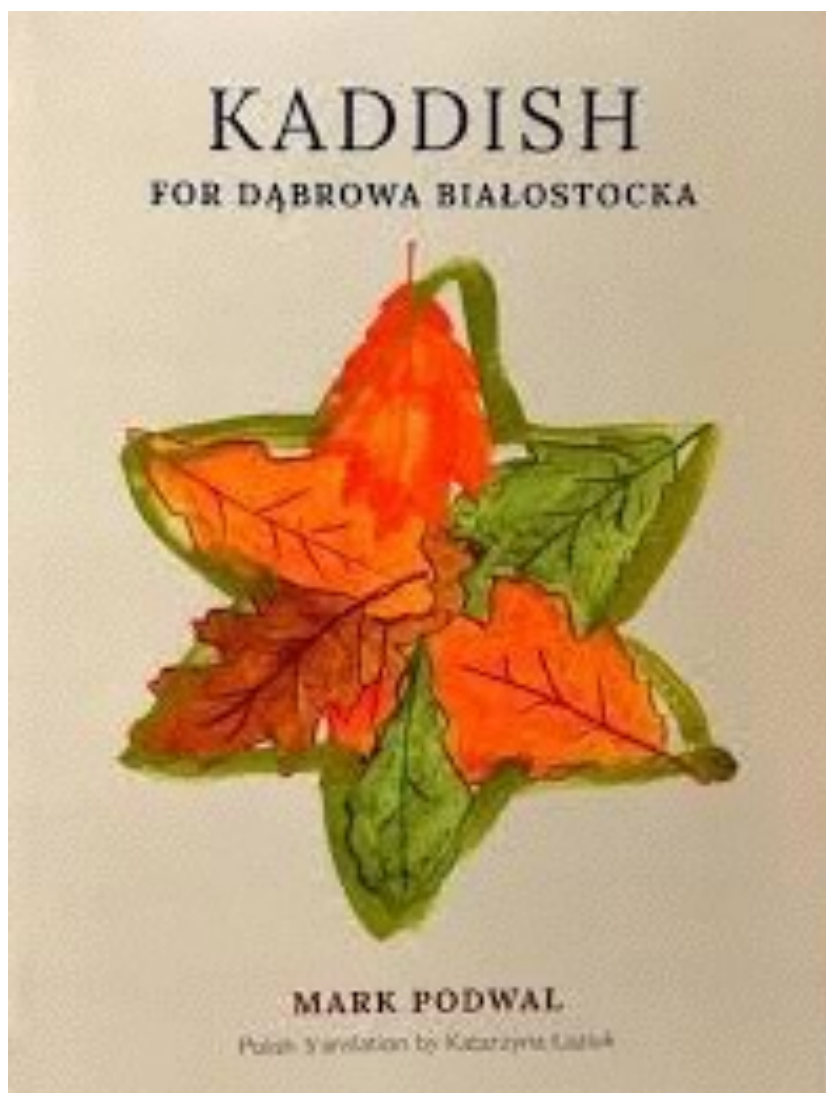
Because it happened to be Poland's Mother's Day," I called my talk "Four Women" and in it spoke about my grandmother Celia, of Sonia Grabinsky (a Dabrowa native who'd escaped Treblinka whom I'd interviewed in Israel and had died in 2006), of Rena Holstein and also about Irena Sendler. What follows are selections from the end of my speech.

There is so much we don't know about each other. And if I knew nothing about Polish heroes (like Irena Sendler and Jerzy Ficowski), I wonder how little you may know about things that on our side we take for granted. That's why a meeting like this is so important for, in a small way, it helps bridge a gap, not only of cold facts but of human stories. Because even in today's hyperconnected world we remain virtual strangers, it's our mutual responsibility to listen and learn from one another. Once again we live in troubling times - certainly not as awful as during the darkest years of the 20th century - but troubling enough. And again, harsh words are being spoken by influential leaders both in your country and mine. Now is a time for all people of good-will to be vigilant in guarding against injustice and hate - and it's in times like these, that it's necessary to hold fast to our best values - including tolerance, kindness, humility and humanity.

That was a fundamental lesson in the life and poetry of Jerzy Ficowski - a lesson that can be learned from “reading ashes” - and today it’s my message to you. Nazi rule in Poland caused the most terrible genocide in human history and Jewish blood and ashes still permeate the soil. But today we haven’t returned in order to cast blame. Rather, we come in a spirit of reconciliation. It’s necessary to learn from the past and never to repeat the worst of it. So, hopefully, as a result of educational programs like this, we all can move forward together in peace. SHALOM.



*The author with grandson Sam and son Ted outside the Jewish cemetery (above)
Dorota Budzinska and her students clear Dabrowa’s cemetery*



KADDISH FOR DABROWA BIALOSTOCKA

In addition to my son and grandson, I invited Dr. Mark Podwal to join us on that trip. He is a Manhattan dermatologist and a world-renowned painter and once had told me that his mother emigrated from Dabrowa Bialostoka in 1929 at age eight. Mark was eager to come, arranged to drive in from Prague and was so moved by the visit that in the first three months after returning home, he produced a series of eighteen vividly colored drawings that he described as a “visible diary” of his trip. The images didn’t focus on the destroyed town per se, but on the vanished world before the Holocaust and, in Mark’s distinctive whimsical style, they displayed themes typical of Poland and Dabrowa with familiar Jewish symbols. The collection was exhibited at several venues in the United States and Europe and were published in a small book called *Kaddish for Dabrowa Bialostocka* with text both in English and Polish.

In her introduction to *Reimagined*, a massive art book that covered the first 45 years of Mark Podwal's career, his friend Cynthia Ozick described him as "one of those startling souls...who can imagine, through the power of a unifying eye, connections so new that they shake the brain into fresh juxtapositions of understanding."



Dabrowa Bialostocka on My Mind

A giant *tefillin* encircles the town as it looked in a 1938 photo.

She suggested that his work seems to be derived from "an unearthly ink pot...as when Jerusalem floats up from leaves of a sacred text or when letters of Torah dance through the ether." Although he's often been encouraged to broaden his subject matter by going beyond Jewish content, one generation removed from Dabrowa, Mark Podwal insists that "my heart is with the Jewish experience."

After completing *Kaddish for Dabrowa Bialostocka*, Mark Podwal wished to display his pictures in Poland and also to donate one thousand copies of his book to individuals both in Dabrowa and elsewhere. He arranged to revisit in June 2018, and this time it was Mark's turn to invite me to accompany him. Along with Kiki Harary from Israel, whose great, grandfather was the last rabbi of Dabrowa, we met up in Warsaw and were driven to Dabrowa. Again there were long speeches at the school, but for me the highlight of the day was when Dorata's class walked us through town and stopped at former Jewish sites to tell us what they'd learned. When we arrived at the cemetery, several students held up enlarged photos of people who were buried there and spoke briefly about each of them. I was delighted that one picture was of my great, grandfather, Moshe Aaron Zaban, the man whom I'm named after but never met. No doubt they'd found it in my *yizkor* book but we weren't able to identify his grave. I tearfully thanked the students and complimented them on the good care they were giving to the cemetery.



Dabrowa students at Mark Podwal's (the man in the middle with a tie) exhibition

After our day in Dabrowa we had a chance to do some touring. One morning we ate bialys in a cafe in Bialystok - nowhere as tasty as the New York variety. On the way back to Warsaw we stopped at Treblinka. I'd visited the infamous death camp on each of my prior visits and again was tremendously moved by the haunting incongruity - the place where nearly 800,000 Jews were incinerated upon arrival, now is a pastoral setting, nature resplendent, sun filtering through a pine forest, birds chirping. And then in a grassy meadow, some 17,000 jagged rocks, simulating broken gravestones, and etched on each the name of a destroyed Jewish *community!*

One evening we attended a meeting of a Polish organization called Forum for Dialogue. Since its inception in 1998, it has provided programs that attempt to break down stereotypes and build mutual trust. Its founder Andrzej Folwarczny says that Forum's goal is to eradicate anti-Semitism, foster Polish-Jewish interactions and teach tolerance through education. They have a network of nearly 100 volunteers who engage thousands of teenagers in more than 130 towns throughout the country in workshops. They also engage public opinion leaders and provide outreach to visiting Israeli students and I was impressed by the enthusiasm of Forum's highly intelligent staff.

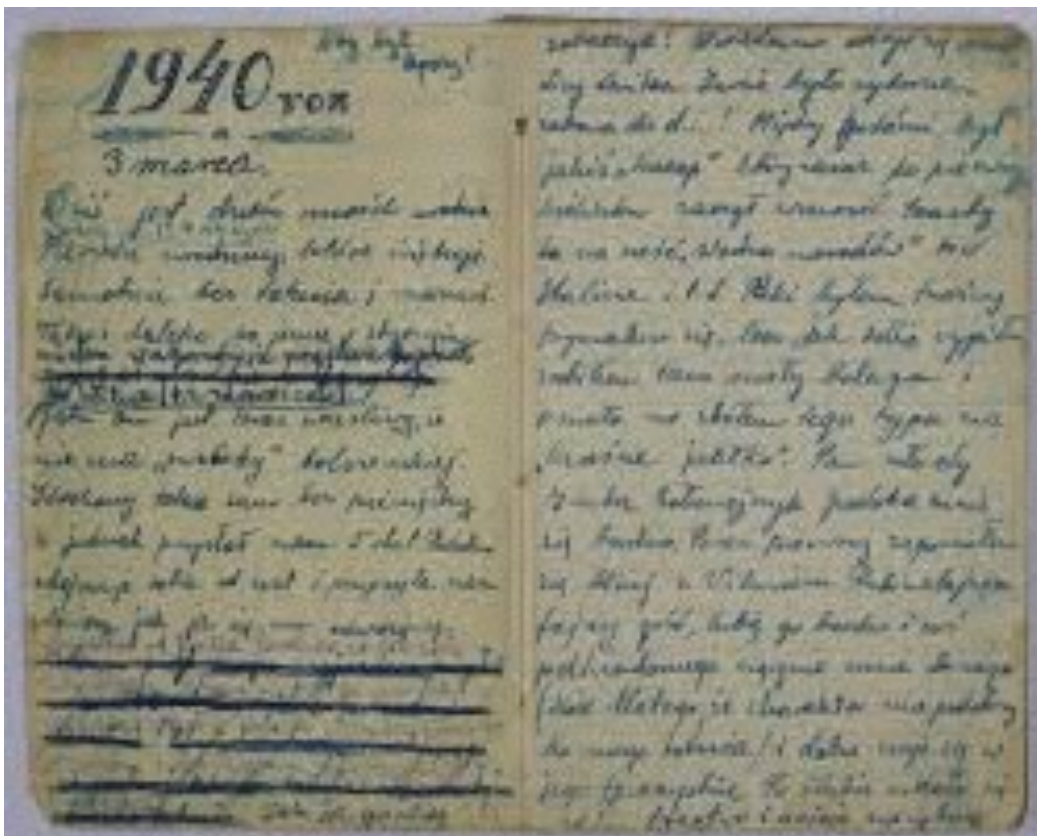
Another admirable organization is the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture that's based in San Francisco. Since 2009 it has disbursed hundreds of grants to more than 100 cultural programs, including the annual Krakow Jewish Culture Festival and also Dorota's school program in Dabrowa. Back in Warsaw we visited another of their projects, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute where we met its director, American-born Helise Lieberman. In 2014 the Taube Foundation were co-sponsors of the splendid POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews that opened on the former site of the Warsaw Ghetto. The museum's mission is to celebrate the contributions made by Jews in this land for more than 800 years before World War II. It's message has been heard by more than a million visitors, nearly half of them school children. We also were led on a tour of a planned Ghetto Museum in the former Jewish children's hospital by its newly appointed director. Naturally, there's politics involved, especially with the current nationalistic right-wing government that calls itself Law and Justice, but progress is being made.

It's estimated that more than 85% of American Jews trace their roots to Eastern Europe, mostly from what today is Poland, but not many know about their heritage there prior to the Holocaust. Moreover, few are aware that today Poland has a small but vibrant Jewish community of between 10 and 20,000 people. Most live in Warsaw and Cracow where there's a fully-functioning Jewish community with synagogues, day schools, kosher restaurants, summer camps, youth groups, JCCs, a B'nai B'rith lodge, Chabad, a *mikvah*. To be sure, there's also factionalism within the tribe and persistent anti-Semitism fanned by the right-wing government but, sad to say, all that seems almost "normal." Nevertheless, what's been especially gratifying to me are the many Poles I've met who appreciate their Jewish past and actively support its renewal.

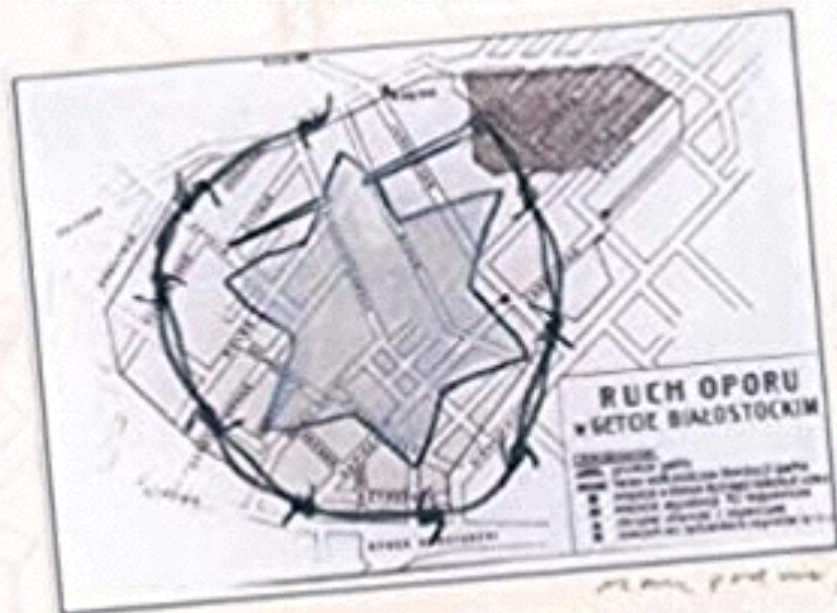
A YOUNG MAN'S LOST WAR DIARY

During my visit to Dabrowa in 2016, Elzbieta Smolenska had served as, what she likes to call, "my humble translator" and afterward we remained in contact. Ela is multitalented and multilingual and has a masters degree in Polish literature. She grew up in Bialystok, and in 1989, while studying in Germany, she met and married an Englishman. For many years Ela worked for BBC World Service and currently is a freelance photographer and artist. Although she and her family live in London, they vacation in Suprasl, a town near Bialystok. In April 2019 when I happened to be in London, Ela invited me for lunch at a Polish club and when we sat down, she surprised me with a gift. It was the recently published diary of a young Bialystoker, David Spiro (Dawid Szpiro in Polish and the surname alternatively could be anglicized as Shapiro.) He began writing in 1939 when he was nearing age 18 and just after his hometown was occupied, first by the Nazis, then Russians, then again by Germans. The last of 52 diary entries was made on July 12, 1943, several weeks before Bialystok's destruction and then the narrative abruptly ended. The reader can only guess at David's fate.

Why the diary lay virtually unnoticed for more than seven decades remains unclear to me, but it was about to be discarded with trash when someone looked inside and discerned it's potential value. The crude document was purchased by the Slendzinsky Gallery in Bialystok and in August 2018 was published there as *Pamiętnik* (Diary) with accompanying English translation and various commentaries. When it was introduced at a memorial event for the 75th anniversary of the Bialystok Ghetto Uprising, the city's mayor declared, "Anyone who identifies with our city...who wants to get to know our roots better, should read this publication...It is worth lending an ear to the voice of the murdered community...Let us cherish the memory of our heritage, let us save this story from oblivion."



VOICES FROM THE BIALYSTOK GHETTO



MICHAEL NEVINS

Elzbieta and I agreed that each of us would do what we could to bring David's diary to an English-reading audience in our respective countries. Ela says that nowadays she thinks of herself as a woman with a mission of pointing out to "the world" that other than Anne Frank's diary, there are many diaries of Polish teenagers that only now are being published, translated or, indeed, noticed. With permission from the Slendzinsky Gallery that now owns David's diary, I did some minor editing and reproduced about 80% of the original text. In order to provide historical perspective, I included other people's "voices" from the war years in Bialystok and Warsaw and the book's cover art and several interior illustrations were donated by Mark Podwal.

David Spiro's diary described life in Bialystok from the perspective of an ordinary young man, an assimilated Jew from a rather well-to-do family. Certainly he was not a charismatic leader and it's difficult to imagine him as one of the martyred fighters during the city's ghetto uprising. No one encouraged David to keep a diary and in one entry he mused, "If someone reads my diary in the future, will they be able to believe something like that? Surely not, they will say poppycock and lies; but this is the truth, disgusting and terrible; for me it's a reality which I would like to avenge so much.

When I returned home from London with Elzbieta's gift, I made an effort to locate ancestors of David Spiro. At the onset of the war, his father and several uncles had escaped to China but nothing was heard of them after that. However, the internet is a wonderful research tool and I was able to locate a likely relative. Michel Bodkier is a French cardiologist who lives in Bordeaux - as well as Paris and Haifa. He happens to be an avid genealogist and is in touch with many of his relatives around the world, but none knew anything about this David Spiro although they shared ancestors. Naturally, Michel was thrilled to learn about the diary and we struck up a trans-Atlantic friendship. I arranged to visit him in Bordeaux but Covid-19 spoiled my plans.

ABSENT FAMILY

My fourth visit to Poland was "virtual." Again, Covid-19 saw to that. The occasion was the 77th anniversary of the Bialystok Ghetto Uprising (August 16-17, 2020) and there were many speakers and performers as well as exhibitions of photographs and films. The title of the event was *Absent Family* and it was held at what once was the town's *Tarbut* school (*Tarbut* was a network of secular Hebrew-language schools established in Poland during the period between the world wars.) The two day program was held mostly outdoors with ample spacing between seats, but despite the pandemic more than 400 people attended, including Poland's chief rabbi. Elzbieta, who was one of the co-hosts and program planners, described it as a "pop up Jewish Heritage Festival." We joke that her interest in Jewish history is genetic because, according to ancestry.com, she is 2% Jewish. In truth, Ela's interest had more to do with Jewish literature that she read during her student days at Warsaw University. Just two years earlier, David Spiro's diary was introduced at this same annual event and this time Ela was there to describe my English language rendition of the diary. I sent a brief video greeting that was projected on a big screen and also contributed several copies of my book.



Co-hosts Elzbieta Smolensk and Dariusz Szada-Borzyszkowski

Tomek (Tomasz) Wiesniewski, who helped organize and also filmed this event, for decades has been accumulating information about local Jewish history. I'd briefly met him on each of my visits to Poland and on my last trip was able to view Tomek's vast archive that contains thousands of photographs, post-cards and documents. Frustrated by years of bureaucratic delays in permitting him to open a history museum in the city, in December 2016 launched an on-line *Museum of the Jews of Bialystok and the Region* and hopes that soon the political logjam will be broken so that he can open a "brick and mortar" museum in the city proper.

Tomek was born in 1958 and moved with his family to Bialystok when he was ten years old. On completing his schooling he attended Warsaw University where he became active in the Solidarity Movement. In 1982 he was arrested for anti-Communist activities and sentenced to nine months in jail. During that period government censorship limited what books could be read in public libraries but that wasn't the case in prison libraries. While there, by chance, he read about the Bialystok ghetto and the almost total annihilation of Poland's Jewish population and this changed his outlook about his town, his country and even his own identity: "I wanted to know what there was before when Jews lived in Bialystok."

Like most of his postwar generation, Tomek had no inkling that his native city once had been an important center of Jewish life, learning and political and economic activity. He was ignorant of the fact that Jews made up the majority of Bialystok's pre-war population, that tens of

thousands of Jews had been confined in the wartime ghetto or that in 1941 the Nazis herded some 1,000 Bialystokers into the city's main synagogue and then torched the building. When he was released from prison, Tomek asked scholars whether these things were true and was told that they were but they were forbidden to talk about or teach them since it was against communist doctrine. Banned from many jobs because of his history of dissidence, Tomek finally persuaded a local newspaper to print brief articles about the city's Jewish history. He began investigating, digging up pre-war guides and newspapers and felt that he was discovering a lost world that had vanished from view and from public awareness as if it had been drowned like the mythical continent of Atlantis. Indeed, "Postcards from Atlantis" was the title of the series of more than one hundred short articles he wrote that was published in the newspaper.

As Tomek once said, "Without knowing much I tried to tell the story of what before the war was practically a Jewish city. But then, elderly people and even a few Jews began to seek me out at the news office. I talked with them for hours, I taped these conversations, I roamed throughout the city; they showed me the buildings of old pre-war Jewish schools. At the same time, I read, read, read, all that I could get my hands on about this subject. And so it began. I made contacts with Jews from Bialystok in Israel, the USA, Australia, everywhere. They sent me their books, photocopies of documents, photographs." Since his prison time some four decades ago, Tomek has devoted his life to documenting Jewish history both in Bialystok and the surrounding region. He studied Yiddish in order to translate surviving inscriptions on tombstones in order to preserve them for posterity. He published books and articles, curated exhibitions and produced more than forty documentary films. Hardly a Jewish visitor on an ancestry trip to the Bialystok region has not read, met or been guided by Tomek and many of these visitors' trips have been memorialized in documentary films posted on his website which receives more than 40,000 visits each month (Jewishbialystok.pl)

In 1998 Tomek Wisniewski received an award from the State of Israel that honors non-Jewish Poles who care about Jewish heritage in Poland. In 2018, at a gala event in Warsaw, the POLIN Museum gave him their coveted annual award for contributions "to both the revival of the memory of the Polish Jews and to building mutual understanding and respect between Poles and Jews." Another time Tomek described his emotional need this way: "The history of the Jews of Bialystok is not just Jewish history for me. The history of the Jews in Bialystok and of Polish Jews in general, is a major part of Polish history. Poles who deny themselves knowledge of this history remain ignorant of themselves and their past. They never get to know who they really are. It is they who are the losers nobody else." Once when asked what Poland would be like if there'd been no Holocaust, Tomek replied, "No doubt it would be troubled by the same problems and conflicts that afflict any multi-cultural society. Some people would nurse anti-Jewish prejudices while others would practice the centuries-old traditions of Polish tolerance. One priest might inveigh against the Jews from the pulpit, while another might spend his evenings in the company of the local rabbi merrily drinking a glass of kosher altar wine and chatting away in a land in which 'holocaust' would be just a word."



Tomek Wiesniewski

CLOSURE

I dedicated Voices from the Bialystok Ghetto “to the many splendid ethnic Poles who are working to preserve and honor the memory of their country’s lost Jewish community.” People like Tomek, Dorota, Elzbieta and many others whom I met during my visits. What had begun as a casual exploration of family roots evolved into a wide-ranging study of East European Jewish history that consumed me for four decades. While doing research I heard stories of many remarkable people and, in the process, had learned more about myself than about my ancestors. Of course, in a general sense, we are all related - Christians and Jews, Poles and Americans - and our similarities far exceed our differences. That being said, my closing words at the Jewish Culture Day in Dabrowa in 2016 still seem apt - perhaps even more so today:

Once again we live in troubling times - certainly not as awful as during the darkest years of the 20th century - but troubling enough. And again, harsh words are being spoken by influential leaders both in your country and mine. Now is a time for all people of good-will to be vigilant in guarding against injustice and hate, and it's in times like these, that it's

necessary to hold fast to our best values - including tolerance, kindness, humility and humanity. That was a fundamental lesson in the life and poetry of Jerzy Ficowski - yes, a lesson that can be learned from “reading ashes” - and today it’s my message to you.



Window in Orla synagogue, 80 miles south of Bialystok. Photo by Elzbieta Smolenska



Treblinka



Dabrowa *landsmanshaft's* 45th anniversary dinner, NYC, 1934



