FOUR DAYS IN POLAND

Michael Nevins

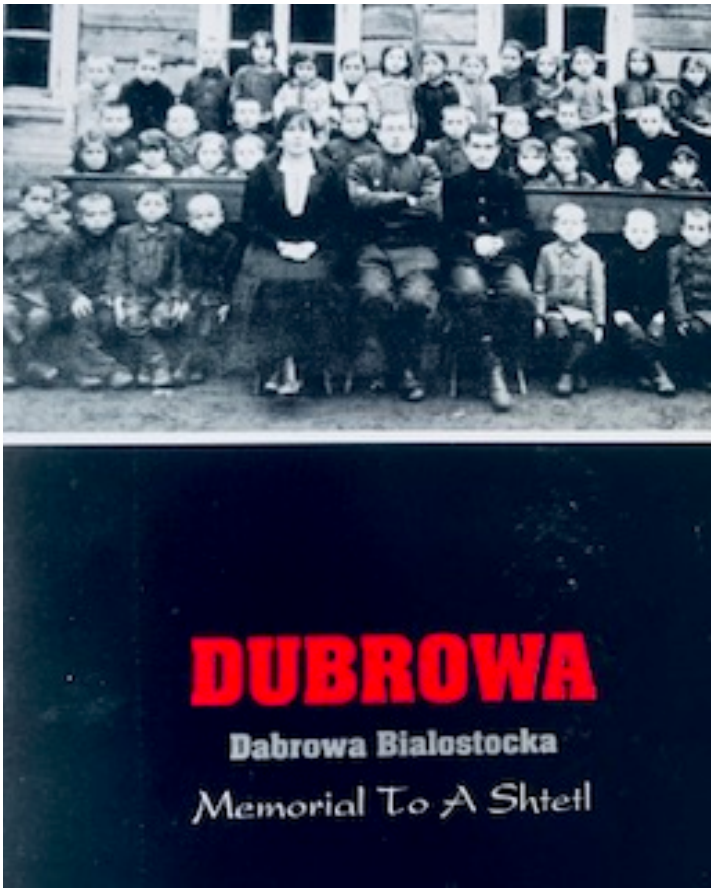
Meshugge? What sane 87 year old takes a four day trip to Europe during the hottest summer in history? I'd previously visited the homeland of my paternal grandparents three times, but on this trip I'd have special company — two of my three children (Danny and Andrea) and five of seven grandchildren (Rachel, David, Talya, Leora and Sam) would be along to coddle "Papa Mike" and learn first-hand what he'd been talking and writing about for so many years. It turned out to be an extraordinary experience, but before describing details, here's some background.

BACKSTORY

What's wrong with this picture? It was taken during the summer of 1941 when Poland had been at war for nearly two years, but all still was peaceful in the United States — especially at Jones Beach. The cute 5 year old boy is ME. The old timers are my paternal grandparents, Hyman and Celia Nevins, both of whom had immigrated to America during the 1890s from a shtetl in czarist Russia called Dabrowa (pronounced Dombrava) that's now located in northeastern Poland. I prefer to believe that soon after grandpa arrived in New York, he saw a Brooklyn street sign for Nevins Street and decided to change his clumsy surname Neviadomsky to what he thought was more Yankee-sounding. During the next four decades my grandparents became relatively Americanized, although neither of them seems to have learned what constitutes appropriate beach attire — *that's* what was wrong with the photo. More important was that during all that time, they'd never told their four children anything about their early lives and no one thought to ask. I had to learn for myself.

Now fast forward to the 1970s by when that little boy was married with three young children of his own and practicing medicine in New Jersey. I'd recently become interested in digging up my family's roots but by then all of my grandparents had passed away and my parents knew hardly anything — nor seemed to care. Fortunately, I discovered a distant cousin of my father's parents who had emigrated from the same shtetl, albeit about a quarter century later. Philip Sidransky had been a school teacher in Dabrowa and later in Brooklyn served as president of the town's *landsmanshaft*. When I interviewed him in Miami, I found that he knew a great deal and was eager to talk. I was enthralled and suggested that he should write some of his stories down, but he said he was too old — that I should do it!

Well that seemed ridiculous — after all what did I know? But I reasoned that the immigrant generation was aging and if not me, who? Philip supplied the names of other emigres whom I tracked down and some of these *landsmen* shared what they remembered until in 1982 I published a small book about my grandparents' home town. I called it *Dubrowa: Memorial to a Shtetl* and donated copies to various libraries and archives and several years later it was reproduced on-line along with numerous other so-called *yizkor* books (see the website of JewishGen.) I thought that I'd completed the project; in fact it was only the beginning.



Cover of my *Yizkor* book, second edition, 2000

I'd become an authority about the history of a place I'd never visited until a dozen years later in 1995 that lapse finally was remedied. I'd learned that two elderly women then living in Maryland, the Schlacter sisters, Rena Holstein and Lilly Gritz, had escaped Dabrowa shortly before the start of World War II and returned many years later to see what was left. They found the town almost completely destroyed and the only evidence of a former Jewish presence was the abandoned cemetery. They decided to do something about this, raised money and hired a former school friend, Jan Jarecki, to build an encircling stone wall with a locked gate. After the work was completed, my wife and I and several others attended a commemorative ceremony in the cemetery and, once again, figured that was the end of my mitzvah project; indeed, during the next fifteen years I rarely thought again about this tiny town in northwest Poland that later was officially named Dabrowa Bialostocka.

Fast forward another decade, this time to 2015, when I received an e-mail from Dorota Budzinska, a school teacher in Dabrowa, who explained that her students were researching their town's long forgotten Jewish history and also had been cleaning up the overgrown cemetery. Dorota had read my book on-line and invited me to speak at a history event that she was planning — and how could I say no? So in May, 2016, along with my son Ted and grandson Sam, we spent a memorable day in my grandparent's hometown.

Also I invited my medical colleague Mark Podwal to join us on the trip. He's a renowned artist and I knew that he'd be interested because his mother had grown up in Dabrowa until when she was age eight in 1929 her family immigrated to America. As it turned out, our visit was so meaningful for Mark that within a few months after returning home, he painted eighteen pictures that were published in a book titled *Kaddish for Dabrowa Bialostocka.* These whimsical pictures were exhibited at various places in the United States and Europe and then in 2018, it was Dr. Podwal's turn to invite me to join him when he returned to Poland in order to distribute copies of his book.

On our earlier trip to Dabrowa I'd met Bialystok-born Elzbieta Smolenska who translated both my and Mark Podwal's speeches for the audience. Afterward we remained in contact and about four years ago when I was visiting London, where Ela lives most of the year, she invited me for lunch at a club for Polish expatriots. When I arrived she gifted me a recently published book titled *Pamietnik* which in Polish means diary. It had been adapted and translated from the long lost diary of a Polish teenager by the name of David Spiro (Polish spelling, Dawid Szpiro or Szapiro) that only recently had been discovered, some 70 years after it was written between 1939 and 1943 in Bialystok.

David Spiro wasn't a charismatic leader and it's difficult to imagine him as being one of the martyred heroes during the ghetto uprising. In one of more than fifty entries 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." David's last entry was made about one month before the Nazis began the final liquidation and, although the exact fate of the by-then 22 year old is unknown, he may have died during the uprising.

David was just an ordinary young man doing his best to survive but, unlike Anne Frank who'd kept a diary while in hiding, he was out on the streets so his hand-written notes provided authentic testimony about daily life in the ghetto. Although his voice was abruptly cut off, his narrative contributes a fresh way for us to understand matters we thought we already knew much about. I edited and republished the diary for an English-reading audience. I titled it *Voices from the Bialystok Ghetto* and included "voices" of several other former Bialystokers. Although the major purpose of this my fourth visit to Poland was to attend a ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the Bialystok Ghetto uprising, the occasion provided an opportunity to discuss my book at the city's newly opened Jewish history museum. But before describing details of our family visit, there's still another part of this lengthy backstory that bears mentioning.

The official title of that 2016 conference in Dabrowa was "A Reading of Ashes" which meant nothing to me, so I did some research and learned this was the title of a collection of 25 poems on Holocaust themes that had been written after the war's end by a young Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski. I located a rare copy of the only English translation of these poems and one in particular had a curious title: "Letter to Marc Chagall." I was intrigued and found that when Ficowski had sent Chagall a copy of his poem, the artist decided to make five etchings as illustrations. In fact, he didn't bother to notify Ficowski of this and it took nearly eight years for him to finish the job. I, too, decided to respond to the grim poem by producing a documentary film about their collaboration — unlike Chagall, my humble project took only about eight months.

Although I had no prior experience in this medium, I joked that if I hoped to catch up with Ken Burns or Steven Spielberg as a Holocaust filmmaker, I'd better get started because at age 86 I was running out of time — and steam. I hired a local film producer, enlisted two actors and a composer and my erstwhile translator Elzbieta volunteered to serve as narrator. The result of our collaboration was a short documentary that merged Ficowski's words and Chagall's illustrations that was completed toward the end of 2022; the video was shown at several venues in the United States and also at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies of UCL (University College London.) Now, finally, with all of that information as introduction, I'll describe several highlights from our four day visit to Poland during the torrid summer of 2023.

DAY ONE

After about a nine hour flight on LOT Airlines, we arrived in early morning, checked into our Warsaw hotel (the Nobu) and immediately set off for The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews that had opened in 2013 on the ghetto's former site, just opposite a giant monument in memory of the heroes of the uprising that was sculpted by Warsaw-born Nathan Rapoport. This museum's purpose is not to focus on the Holocaust *per se,* but to describe contributions made by Jews in this land for nearly one thousand years. Elzbieta ("Ela") guided us as we spent a few hours wandering through the fascinating exhibits.

After lunch we set off to visit the office of Forum for Dialogue an NPO which since 2008 has provided programs to foster Polish-Jewish interactions through education. The Forum's founder and president Andrzej Folwarczny had invited me to visit and learn more about their current work, especially how it promotes tolerance for Polish teenagers. Last year alone, workshops were held in more than 130 small towns and, as one elementary school teacher wrote, "I had three goals related to this project. The first was to encourage them to learn history in a different way than at school…The second was to mobilize them as a group… And the third thing was to show them that there is something extremely important in life, like tolerance." In 2021 online virtual meetings attracted an audience of more than 1,600 adult participants from 21 countries (about 800 from the US, 150 from Poland, 100 each from Israel and Canada) which help to finance this splendid organization's work. Andrzej engaged my family in dialogue which, after all, is what the Forum does best.

On that first evening we dined in a restaurant near Warsaw's Old Town and our guests included Ela's husband Ian Tidder and their college-age children Mirela and Alexander (below) who got along with my grandchildren as if they were cousins.

Also present was Elzbieta ("Bieta") Ficowska, the late poet's wife and her friend who currently is writing a novel based on Bieta's remarkable story. Six months after she was born in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, her parents sedated baby Bieta, put her in a wooden box with air holes and placed inside a silver teaspoon with her name and birth date inscribed. Then the baby was smuggled out and raised by the same Catholic midwife who had delivered her. She didn't know about her origin until she was a teenager and now the woman, whom I still think of as "the baby in a box", is 80 years old (she's the lady in the hat shown below.) Bieta once wrote, "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."

DAY TWO

Our genial minivan driver Marek Chmielewski is a burly farmer who speaks no English. He compensated for this as he drove my family for hours at a time by playing loud Jewish music on a continuous loop to the auditory exhaustion of my grandchildren. Marek lives in Orla, a small village near Bialystok, where for many years he has served as honorary mayor. He's received awards for his work as an activist including restoring Orla's former synagogue as a sometime museum and concert hall. In translation, this is how Marek once explained himself:

> *My family has lived in Orla for generations. All my ancestors are from here and so is my wife…..Ever since I can remember, the synagogue building dominated the townscape and the surrounding area, with thousands of pigeons roosting on its top. I would be confronted with the building time and again, willy-nilly, just like I would be confronted by fragments of reminiscences of Orla's Jewish residents. However, neither the edifice itself nor other people's memories stirred my curiosity at the time.*

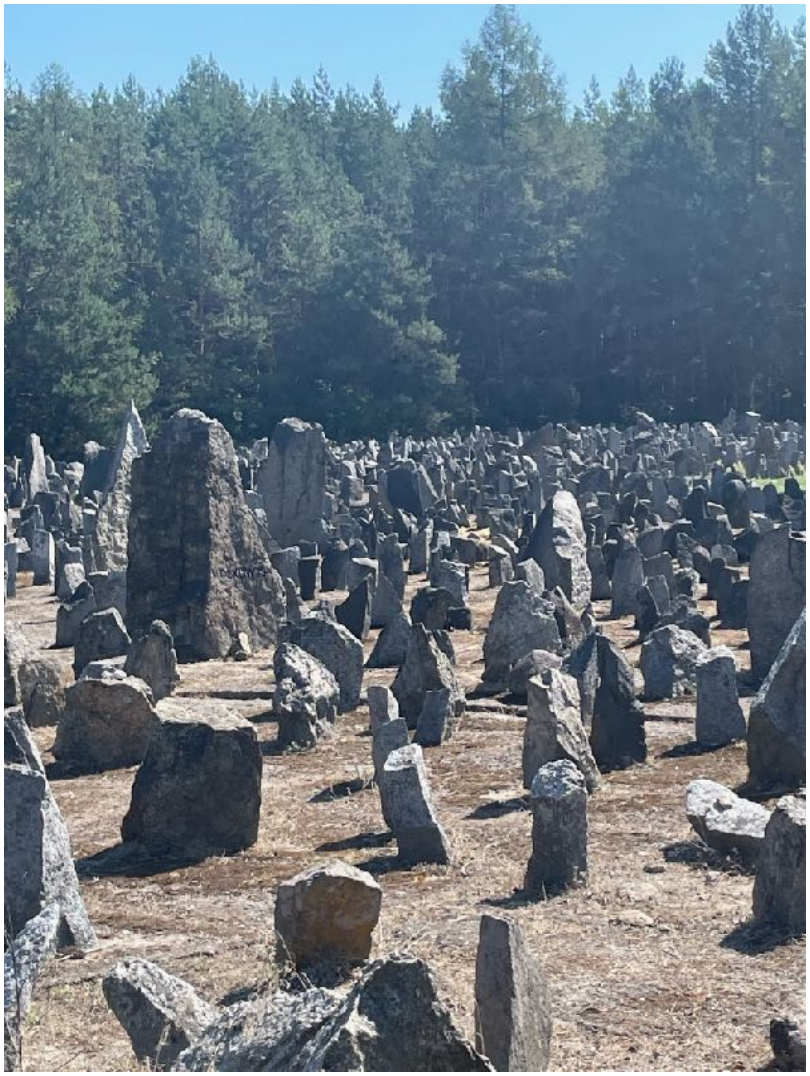
A change in my perception of both Orla's Jewish history as well as of Jews in general happened some thirty years ago. I owe it to a certain meeting and friendship. It was the late 1980s, a time of transformation. At the time, I was a clueless 25-year-old with no interest in Jewish studies and not unfamiliar with negative stereotypes about Jews….

*At the time my wife and I befriended a young married couple from Mińsk. One day in the course of our visit, Zhana, the wife, went out to meet us and said: "Listen Marek, I have a request – don't say anything about Jews, my dad has come over to visit." It turned out that our friend's father was a Jewish officer, which I had not been aware of. I still remember my shame; I think that one sentence cured me from my "juvenile anti-Semitism…… History is what it is. We cannot change it…Commemoration of the community must be sorted out, one small step at a time. We honor our [former] Jewish neighbors with just one word — 'Neighbors.' Nothing more. I don't do it for mys*elf, *I do it for the village. I believe we need to think about the future*

Dorota, Ela, Papa and Marek

TREBLINKA

Our tiny caravan, Marek's minivan and Ian's Mazda, proceeded northeast for about an hour through farm country and forests until we arrived at Treblinka, the notorious death camp where more than 800,000 were incinerated upon arrival. As during my three earlier visits, we were virtually the only visitors (unlike at Auschwitz) and I was struck by the incongruity of what once had occurred in this pastoral setting. The Nazi's had attempted to cover their tracks by burning everything down so there's little evidence of what once occurred there as we silently trudged along a path marked by simulated stone railroad tracks until we arrived at an open meadow. There, surrounding a stone tower, were large rocks that resembled broken grave stones and upon each was inscribed the name of a single destroyed Jewish *community* — 17,000 of them!



Only one stone memorialized an individual — the Jewish pediatrician Januscz Korczak who chose death rather than abandon 200 orphans in his charge. He became an inspiration to his nation, and many years later to me, so I gathered our group around this stone and told them about this medical martyr.

TICOCIN

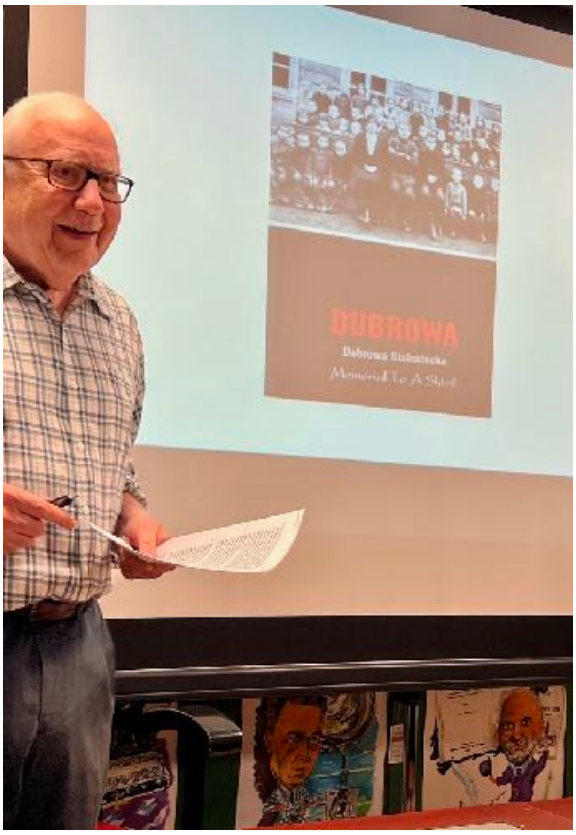
Next our caravan proceeded to the village of Ticocin in order to visit their former synagogue which now serves as a Jewish museum. Alas, it was closed but all was not in vain because on this steamy hot day, we enjoyed refreshing ice cream cones. Revived, we drove on to Bialystok where we stayed for the next three nights at the Hotel Cristal.

THE SMALLEST JEWISH MUSEUM IN THE WORLD

On each of my three previous trips, I'd met Tomacz "Tomek" Wisniewski, a local historian, filmmaker, author and tour guide, who this time had invited me to speak at his recently opened museum in Bialystok. Tomek was born in 1958 and had moved with his family to Bialystok when he was seventeen. While attending Warsaw University, he became a political dissident and in 1982 was arrested and spent nine months in jail. During that period Soviet government censorship limited what books could be read in public libraries, but that wasn't the case in prison libraries. By chance, he found a book in prison that described the Bialystok Ghetto and the annihilation of Poland's Jewish population. This changed his outlook about his town, his country, even his own identity and he decided to learn whatever he could about Jewish life in Bialystok before the war.

In 2018 the POLIN Museum gave Tomek their coveted annual award for "contributions to building mutual understanding and respect between Poles and Jews." As he explained, "The history 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." Tomek worked for many years to establish a Jewish museum in Bialystok and three months ago finally overcame bureaucratic resistance, perhaps antisemitic-based, and opened what he calls "The Place" — described as "the smallest Jewish museum in the world."

That evening I had the honor of speaking about my own experiences, including my book "Voices from the Bialystok Ghetto" which seemed appropriate since the next day would be the city's official ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the uprising. Other American tourists were in town for the occasion and we were able to compare notes about shared experiences with new and old friends. During the talk I projected several slides and Ela translated and added her own comments. After a Q&A, Tomek gifted me with a Bialystok inscribed T-shirt (see below) and, although it was very hot in the crowded basement space, the audience was enthusiastic and my family were proud.


DUBROWA
Dubrowa Białostocka
Memorial To A Shtetl

With Tomek

DAY THREE

BIALYSTOK'S GHETTO UPRISING

The commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising was marked by pomp and parading, a military band played marches and soldiers fired rifle shots. We sat in the VIP section next to heavily decorated police officers and assorted dignitaries. Each of the speakers mentioned the Ukrainian situation just a few miles away, and all spoke about the famous international lawyer Samuel Pisar who had grown up in Bialystok until when he was thirteen years old the ghetto was liquidated. At Auschwitz the boy filed naked in front of Dr. Mengele and was "selected" to live and work. After surviving three years at Majdanek and Dachau, he escaped during a death march and emerged from the war hardened and wild: "To rejoin the world, I had to wipe out the first 17 years of my life…I muted the past and turned to the future with a vengeance."

Samuel Pisar went on to lead an extraordinary life: educated at the Sorbonne and Harvard, a renowned lawyer and adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Nixon, friend and confidant of Nelson Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger, Golda Meier, Mark Rothko and Leonard Bernstein. When in 1995 he accompanied French president Giscard d'Estaing on a commemorative visit to Auschwitz, he began his address: "I bear you the personal testimony of a rare survivor, perhaps the youngest survivor of all."

Samuel Pisar died in 2015 at age 86 and an obituary in the *NY Times* recalled that his good friend Leonard Bernstein had been unhappy with lyrics he'd written for the *Kaddish* Symphony No. 3 that was dedicated to the assassinated President Kennedy. Bernstein asked Mr. Pisar to rewrite the words for the Jewish prayer for the dead, but he felt that his talents were not equal to the music and declined. However, after Bernstein's death in 1990 and prompted by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Pisar reconsidered and wrote a highly personal version of the Kaddish that recapitulated his own life; like Job he argued with God. It was first performed in 2003 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and six years later when it was played at Yad Vashem in honor of the victims of the Warsaw ghetto, Pisar read the words to a hushed audience. His daughter Leah described that event as being "so much more resonant there than elsewhere…It was as if he was saying Kaddish for all the six million." (*NYT* July 28, 2015.)

Although Samuel Pisar's stepson, American Secretary of State Antony Blinken, couldn't attend this ceremony in person, he spoke remotely and his face was projected on a large screen.

What follows next are extracts from Secretary Blinken's eloquent speech about his step-father's profound influence on him.

How are we to understand this uprising eight decades later? I see it as one of countless acts of resistance by Jews in ghettos and Nazi German concentration camps across Europe – to reject their dehumanization, to reaffirm their dignity. Acts not of futility, but of bravery. Acts like those of Sam's father, David, who smuggled Jewish children out of the ghetto and weapons into it – for which he was eventually denounced to the Gestapo, and then tortured, killed, and thrown into a mass grave. Acts like the decision of Sam's mother, Helaina, made on the day they were deported – forcing her son to wear long pants instead of shorts, despite the blistering heat, so that he'd look more like a man than the boy he was, and so the Nazis would send him to a forced labor camp rather than to a death camp. He often said that, on that day, his mother gave him life for a second time.

For Sam himself, there were many acts of resistance. Surviving in the ghetto; escaping twice after being sent to the gas chamber at Auschwitz – once by picking up a brush and pail and pretending he'd been sent to clean the floors; and, at dawn on a spring day in 1945, breaking away from a Nazi death march and into the arms of American GIs.He never stopped resisting – by building a new life, a storied career, a family, and by relaying what he had endured from town halls to halls of power. When the Polish edition of his memoir was first published in the 1980s, he made one of many returns to Bialystok.

After speaking at a local high school, students followed him out onto the streets. They wanted him to show them where the ghetto had once stood, and to know what their parents and grandparents did when SS guards herded Jews toward the railway station. "Did they offer you a sip of water?" the students asked. "Did they shed a tear?" Samuel kept telling his story, even though it was excruciating to relive it, because he felt an overwhelming responsibility to ensure that people never forgot, a responsibility made heavier by the fact that he was the only member of his immediate family – and of hundreds of students in his school in Bialystok – to survive. As we lose more and more survivors, the responsibility to relay and to grapple with that history passes to all of us.

For that reason, I'm grateful to the city of Bialystok, to its leaders, and to its citizens for recognizing this day, among other steps you have taken to ensure coming generations know what happened here. Like teaching the accurate history of the Holocaust in Bialystok's schools….and placing a steppingstone outside Sam's childhood home, inscribed with the names of his murdered family members. The United States will always be your partner in keeping this history alive. We're taking another step in that effort by working with our Congress to invest $1 million to help create a virtual tour of Auschwitz-Birkenau so that more people who can't visit can experience the indelible impact of seeing that site.

So many more markers can and must be placed to educate people about this chapter of human history. For as my stepfather knew, "Never again" was not a guarantee. It was a command, in his words, "to do whatever I can in the struggle for a victory of hope over hate, destruction, and death, forces that can yet again, if [we do] not take care, drive humankind to madness." For Samuel, "Never again" was also a call for each of us to ask those difficult questions, not only of our past but of our present, not only of others but of ourselves. What are my acts of resistance? What am I doing in the face of inhumanity?

Of all his efforts to resist the Nazis, the one that I believe made Sam proudest was the act of love, not only surviving himself but building a new family and instilling the lives of those in it with a sense of hope, of freedom, of justice. That was his greatest revenge against Hitler. So on this day, I know he would be especially moved to see not only his wife and two of his children in Bialystok, but also three of his five grandchildren – Arielle, David, Jeremiah – all doing their part to fulfill the enduring responsibility that, together, we inherit: to make real the command of "Never again."

Judith and Leah Pisar

In their formal remarks Bialystok's mayor and the ambassadors from the United States, Germany and Israel all mentioned how the horrors of history relate to current events across the nearby border to Ukraine. Secretary Blinken's mother Judith Pisar spoke about her late husband and after the ceremony I had a brief chat with her and daughter Leah (see above). Several months earlier I'd met them both at a book-signing event held at Judith's Manhattan apartment and it was then that Leah told me of their plans to visit Bialystok in August. It was that conversation which provided the impetus for me to plan this brief visit.

After the speeches, bouquets of daffodils* were placed, drums rolled, rifles fired and the impressive ceremony ended. I went up and introduced myself to Ambassador Mark Brudzinski, told him that I was a fellow Dartmouth alumnus, and gave him a copy of my book. I also greeted Rabbi Michael Shudrich, the chief rabbi of Poland, and introduced him to my son Rabbi Danny Nevins, a fellow graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

*Daffodils are associated with Marek Edelman, the last commander of the Jewish Combat Organization. Every year on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising he placed daffodils at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw, Poland and at other sites associated with the extermination of Jews. A Daffodils campaign was initiated by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in 2013 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Over 500 volunteers handed-out 50 000 paper daffodils pins and about 80 000 brochures with historical information. TV news presenters at every major TV channel wore daffodils that day, extending the reach of the campaign to millions of viewers and yellow daffodils became widely recognized as a symbol of remembrance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

STOLPERSTEINES

Once the official proceedings were over, we walked several steamy blocks to join the Pisar family for their *stolpersteine* ceremony at which five concrete cubes, each bearing a brass plate inscribed with the name and life dates of victims of Nazi extermination were placed. The word literally means stumbling stone or, metaphorically, a stumbling block.

There are more than 70,000 such markers embedded amidst cobblestones in more than 1,200 European cities and towns, each commemorating a Holocaust victim outside their last-known residence. Prior to this event, hardly any stones had been placed in Poland, but Bialystok ignoring this precedent, chose to honor their famous native son in this poignant and symbolic way.

On this extremely hot day, there were no ice cream cones available nor even cold drinks, but we staggered on to a nearby restaurant for rehydration and restoration, and that evening there was a surprise event.…

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF— IN POLISH

A Yiddish theater group from Warsaw presented a free outdoor production of *Fiddler on the Roof* in Bialystok's central square that was attended by at least 5,000 locals. We were given tickets up front and, naturally, didn't need translation as we knew almost every word. The audience's polite reaction was rather tepid as if they were bewildered — very unlike the exuberant crowds who have attended Yiddish productions in New York City in recent years.

DAY FOUR

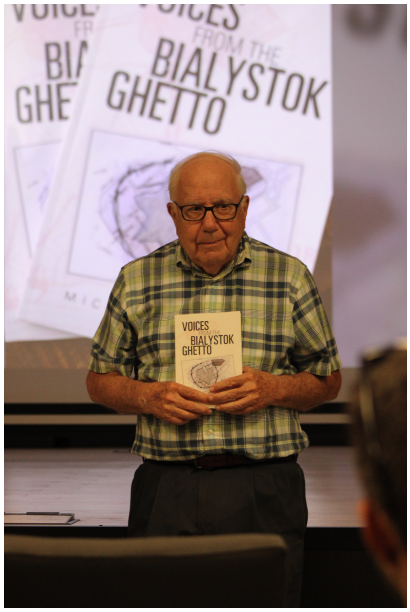
Many years ago when Dorota Budzinska first began teaching in Dabrowa, she realized that although living Jews had disappeared long before, their dead remained as silent witnesses of the past. The neglected cemetery felt like a personal reproach and, feeling a moral obligation she decided to clean it up. Also, she believed that active engagement in educational activities will change perception of “Jewish matters,” not only for her students but also for the local community. In 2019 when Dorota was nominated for the prestigious POLIN Award, she recalled that “the Jewish cemetery was like a silent reproach; although 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 make 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 says that she believes in the young generation — that they will be wise, tolerant and open. When we arrived at Dabrowa's cultural center, she had arranged a surprise. We were greeted by a gathering of town officials, photographers and high school students and after a brief slide show about Jewish-related matters, each of my family were asked to introduce themselves. Then it was the students turn to question us and I did my best to explain why it was important for all of us to learn from the past in order to inform the present and prepare for the future.

We visited several sites in town that commemorated local Jewish history, including a picture of an oak tree based on one of Mark Podwal's paintings that appears as a mural on an outside wall of one of the schools. Then we drove to the Jewish cemetery that I'd first visited in 1995. I still couldn't find the stone of Moshe Aaron Zaban, the great, great grandfather after whom I'm named, but his surname was engraved on a cemetery wall. After saying our goodbyes, we drove north for another hour through lovely countryside to our next destination.



THE BORDERLAND FOUNDATION

Krzysztof Czyzewski is a poet, author and activist who in 1990 was one of four initiators of the Borderland Foundation in Sejny, a small town near where the Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian borders converge. Their tiny collective of artists and actors established studios for art and education programs in what once had been the town's yeshiva and synagogue and in 2011 the group opened an International Center for Dialog in nearby Krasnogruda. This became a civic space where citizens from all over, recently including hundreds from Ukraine, can peacefully discuss the conflicts that separate them. Their programs focus on educating a new generation of young people who work together to recover the region's multicultural and multilingual heritage through a wide range of literary and scholarly projects.

Krzysztof believes that it's best not to speak about resolving conflicts, but rather about how to live with them; instead of removing borders, to think about crossing them:

> *The challenge for all of us is how to live in a world with others different from ourselves. Are they really so different? We may have different customs and backgrounds but fundamentally we are all the same; the other is us….The work toward cultural understanding cannot end with a few declarations, smiles, and organizing a nice festival….*
> *This is not enough. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. ... [A] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition*.

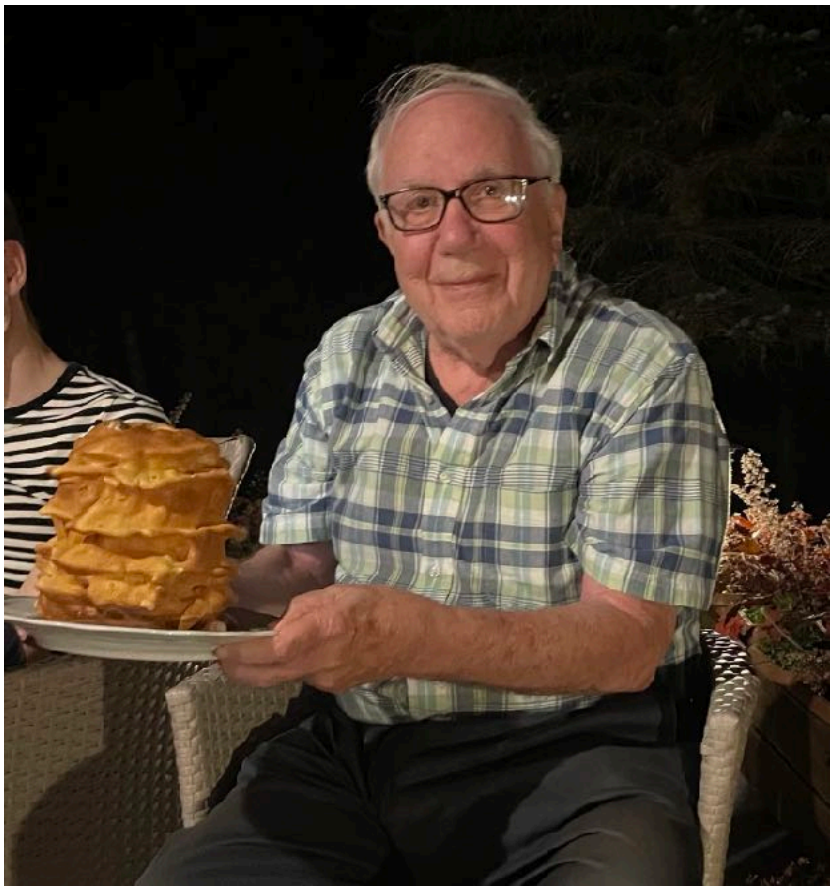
Leaders of this unique NPO take this as their starting point, emphasizing hands-on engagement both locally and internationally. A docent led us on a tour of the Foundation's manor house and afterward, we had a pleasant chat with Krzysztof. He even offered to show my video at a program to be held in September 2024 that will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Jerzy Ficowski's birth. Another trip?

A PHOTO GALLERY OF MEMORIES

ELA

DOROTA


PERLA




SZALOM

EARLY MORNING REFLECTIONS

It wasn't easy recovering from six hours of jet lag but this afforded abundant time to reflect on our adventure. Most of all I was pleased that my family all were inspired from this extraordinary experience. It occurs to me that I haven't given sufficient credit here to the contributions of Elzbieta and her husband Ian, respectively translator and chauffeur, but so much more than that. They assured our comfort and provided informed context to what we were viewing — also it was a pleasure to observe how their children Mirela and Alexander got along with my "kids", just like family. My son Danny, also suffering from jet lag, has been up

early since our return writing his own journal, more scholarly and rabbinic than mine, so if you wish to read his perspective, you can find it at the following link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OqvyEvZl62TdijqoNFSzRFsc04gvsXUqhLfMF_vN_ys/edit?usp=sharing

OY! So much in just four days.

Michael Nevins
August 22, 2023