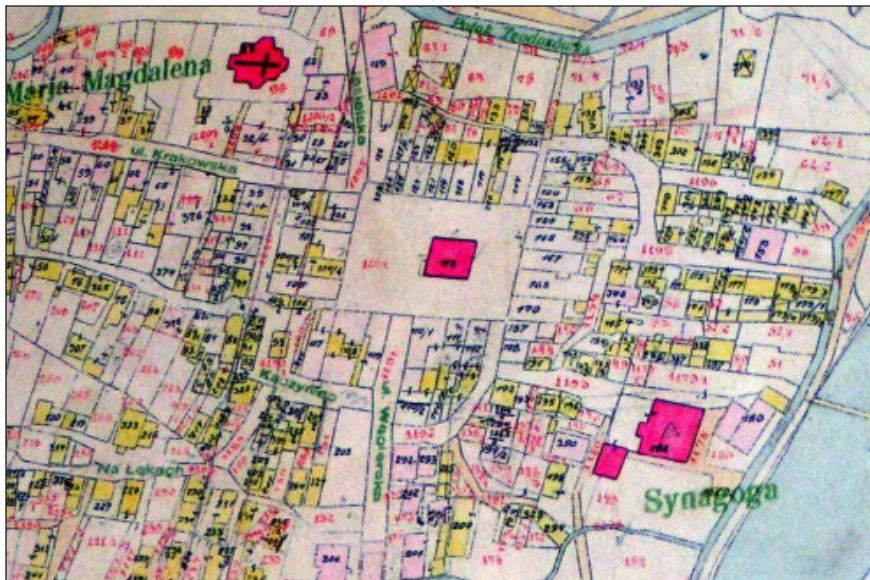


DUKLA, My Father's Little Shtetl



The cadastral map of Dukla, with the town hall in the center of the rynek in the center of the map. My father's family lived at ulica Wegierska (ulica means street), the wide street that begins at the southern edge of the rynek, on the second block where now nothing stands. The synagogue is the larger pink building shown to the right.

A little bit about Dukla:

Dukla is a town where Jews for years constituted a considerable majority of citizens. Due to a registration dated 1881, 2,553 Jewish people lived here, which made 84.2% of the whole population. From Dukla came, among others, Naftali and Gitel Rubinstein, Helena Rubinstein's parents who was a world-famous cosmetic business tycoon.

Some traces of the Jewish society can still be found in Dukla nowadays. On Cegrowska street one can see the ruins of a synagogue, built in 1758 and destroyed by the Nazis during the war. Near, there is also a building of an old Jewish school.

The Jewish cemetery in Dukla is situated on the southern end of the city, on the right side of the road towards Barwinek. The necropolis consists of two parts - the so called old cemetery, established at the beginning of the XVIII century, and the new cemetery, which, adjacent to the old one, functions since about 1870. The old cemetery some of matzevot retained, lots of which are broken and mossy. The new cemetery, where one can find about 200 well-preserved gravestones, is walled. Unfortunately, many of matzevot were used by Germans for the regulation of the Smereczna stream or for building works. The Jewish cemetery in Dukla has a landmark status. In 2005 the necropolis was tidied up by the members of the Polish Jewish Students' Union, which, in cooperation with the Association for the Development of Dukla Region, aims to gain some funds for the workmanship of the synagogue's roof and its fence.

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On Saturday morning Kris, our guide and driver, met us once again at 9:00 and the four sleepy heads nodded off frequently on the long drive. Cumulative exhaustion trumps the desire to see and do everything when a vacation such as this presents so many experiences crammed into a short time. The countryside in Poland is just beautiful. Rolling green hills dotted with farms, houses, trees, livestock, even windmills, all paint a picture that touched my heart. Maybe deep down there's *a little Polish country girl in me because I couldn't take my eyes off the scenery even as I was drifting in and out of sleep. It felt familiar and comfortable.



Kris discussed the history of the area and the importance of Dukla, my father's little shtetl, but it was hard to follow. I was exhausted and yet energized (at least mentally) and wanted to miss

nothing on this trip. I thought the drive would be about two and a half hours per my research on Google Maps, but it was more like three and a half hours. We arrived at a parking lot on the main street in this tiny town of about 2000 residents, and were met by Robert, our guide and preserver of the long-gone Jewish life of Dukla. Kris and Robert spoke briefly and then we walked toward the *rynek*, the small square in the center of town. Immediately I was enamored of this spot, and I don't know why (see * above).



The public WC (attended by a not-very-warm-and-fuzzy woman collecting zlotys for use of the toilets—fortunately I can say “good day” and “thank you, Madame” with a very good Polish accent, and I smile a lot), located behind a map of Dukla below the town’s crest.



With Kris, enjoying our lunch *al fresco*. The clouds lifted soon after.



A degustation of roast pig on the *rynek* was conveniently going on as we arrived—oversized free servings with cole slaw and potatoes made for a delicious lunch, and reminded me of a stupid joke about a Jewish dilemma....

The town hall on the *rynek* made me think of the Alamo.



This building on a street surrounding the *rynek* was once the home of a rabbi.



This was a Jewish orphanage, created by Baron Hirsch.



Lody is a very important word. Delicious, and a small cone was about \$.35.

We then drove on to the cemetery.

From JewishGen:

The Jewish cemetery in Dukla is situated on the southern end of the city, on the right side of the road towards Barwinek. The necropolis consists of two parts - the so called old cemetery, established at the beginning of the XVIII century, and the new cemetery, which, adjacent to the old one, functions since about 1870. The old cemetery some of matzevot [headstones] retained, lots of which are broken and mossy. The new cemetery, where one can find about 200 well-preserved gravestones, is walled. Unfortunately, many of matzevot were used by Germans for the regulation of the Smereczna stream or for building works. The Jewish cemetery in Dukla has a landmark status. In 2005 the necropolis was tidied up by the members of the Polish Jewish Students' Union, which, in cooperation with the Association for the Development of Dukla Region, aims to gain some funds for the workmanship of the synagogue's roof and its fence. (source: <http://www.kirkuty.xip.pl/dukla.htm>)



Local kids tried on suits of chain mail and helmets and played with the lances and shields of a few enthusiasts in a faux encampment on the rynek.



Here is what remains of the old synagogue in Dukla. We did not go closer than the fence.

The synagogue in Dukla (Cergowska Street) was built in 1758 in the place of the former, wooden one which was destroyed by a fire. During World War II, in 1940, the synagogue was burnt by the Germans. It has been in ruins ever since.

The synagogue, made of stone, was built on a rectangular plan of 12 by 16 metres. There was a basement underneath the main prayer room. The stone walls to the height of the roof, an ornamental stone portal to the west, the Aron ha-Kodesz recess inside the main prayer room and the remnants of polichromy on the southern wall still remain today. However, the additions to the building which housed the vestibule, a library and the women's gallery have not been preserved.



This is the memorial stone placed in August 2012 on the 70th anniversary of the slaughter of the remaining Jews of Dukla. Here's where Dukla connections get interesting.

When we arrived on the rynek, Robert walked ahead of us and made a phone call. I didn't believe what I heard next.

Robert spoke in Polish with Herman, his friend in Israel, who lived in Dukla before the war. He told me that Herman's family moved into the apartment that my grandparents lived in until 1936 when they left for Krakow. (I think it was about 1934, as the ship's manifest from January 1935 when my father arrived here indicates his father's address in Krakow.) Herman was friends with my father's youngest sibling, Benny, a Holocaust victim. Cynic that I am, I thought this was a nice way to entertain the Americans seeking their roots—a coincidental story that would connect a memory of my family to a living person! But no, it was not fiction. Robert gave me Herman's sister Rachel's phone number and insisted I call her when I got back to NY. The 718 area code gave me a hint that Rachel was probably in Brooklyn, and probably orthodox.

Skipping ahead, the first morning home I eagerly called Rachel, who is 90 years old and lives in Boro Park. She told me her brother has a much better memory of their youth in Dukla but that she remembered my father's family and my grandfather, and that he walked with a limp (I was told he had a club foot). That was the moment that made it all click for me, to know that two living people remember my father's family from Dukla.

Herman's family, including Rachel's daughter Esther who is my age and lives on Long Island, made the trip to Dukla to place this memorial to the Jews of Dukla, and continues to maintain the cemetery of the prewar Jewish community. Esther and I met up and talked about our Dukla connection two weeks after I got home.

We walked up into the newer cemetery higher on the hill and took a few photos of the headstones, all in Hebrew.



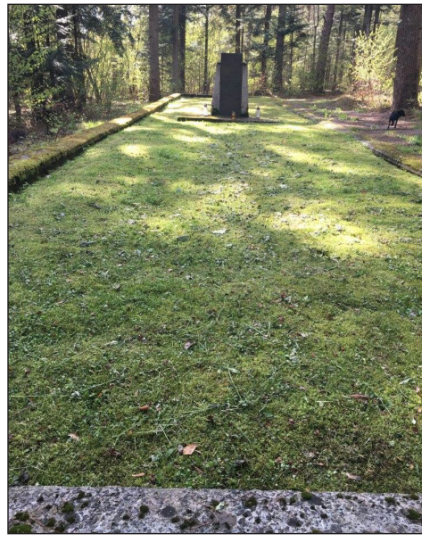
This is the driveway down to the main road—that landscape was spectacular. I had to remind myself that bucolic Polish scenery is not so lovely in the brutal cold winters....



This is the cemetery gate, with the new cemetery behind us and the old one just past the trees. Herman's memorial is to the right of our car. This is my favorite photo from that day, maybe from the trip.

We then drove out of town a few kilometers to a site of a mass grave and presumably my family members are in this spot. When, as a child, I asked my father

about my grandparents, he told me they were made to dig a grave and were shot and that was all he said. And so I don't think I ever asked again.



It is a long rectangular plot, bordered with a mossy stone ledge, with the memorial in the center. I have a photo my father took of this stone from perhaps 1978 when I know he was in Dukla. The stone indicates that it is a memorial to the 500 Jews of Dukla and Rymanow who were killed there on August 13, 1942.

Below is the sign indicating the site, which reads, "Jewish gravesite," with a cross.



We drove to the Czech border, turned around, and had our late lunch at a large restaurant where a very quiet group was celebrating the 18th birthday of a young woman. It was not festive—we thought perhaps they were returning from a funeral. Again we devoured pierogi of all kinds, enjoying every bite as we did each time we dined in Poland.

Here we are with Robert, our Dukla guide, as the sun goes down and we prepare to drive back to Krakow after an emotional and very fulfilling afternoon. I felt so good, so content that I made this trip, so happy that I learned about my family and found a new place to love. Yeah, I never thought I'd feel that way about Poland.



I feel as if the story of my journey ends here, but I know it doesn't. I made connections with several other people from Dukla by way of the JewishGen website, including one who I wrote to that evening when I went back to the page and looked again at names of people who were actively searching for others with Dukla roots. One of them wrote back to me that I should get in touch with someone who has the same last name as her family but is not related... Rachel's daughter, Esther.

As I write this, I realize I'm crying for the first time since before the trip, when every glance at a picture of my parents and their families before the war touched my heart. I do get a lump in my throat now when I talk about this trip and how satisfying it was for me. I think how the minor inconveniences—being unable to rent a car, a madcap dash for a departing train, a problem with our original apartment rental, etc.—were rectified and ultimately everything went smoothly. How the people we met were so kind and helpful and made this meaningful trip even more so, how I felt comfortable and safe and welcome in a place where once there were no words to describe what would have happened to me if I were born 20 years earlier... I cannot look at Poland as a place where the main thing that was perceived and remembered was that Jews were killed there, because now there is life and interest in a culture and a religion that survived.

How meaningful that in Krakow, near the spot where once there stood a ghetto, a prelude to eventual death of the Jewish community, we celebrated shabbat dinner at the very alive JCC, we said the bruchas (blessings) over bread and wine, on the night after Passover ended, on the day that I walked along the rail platform of Birkenau where most Jews who walked there walked not in freedom but to their death.... I went to Auschwitz because I could, and I saw where my parents lived and I connected to my roots. I had no expectations but one, sadly unmet, to visit the inside of my mother's house, but other than that I was constantly rewarded with more than what I came to find.

I would make this journey again in a heartbeat, retrace my steps (except for Lodz), revisit Dukla, explore Warsaw and Krakow, and keep connecting to a past that intrigues me.

In July of 1929 and January of 1930, this is how my parents looked, aged 6-1/2 and 19....



And these people now know about their grandparents' lives, just a little bit more.



*I am most grateful to my high school classmate Adam Zucker for making the documentary, *The Return*, (www.thereturndocumentary.com), which inspired me to make this journey, and Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, whose talk at Brotherhood Synagogue in NYC in November of 2015 gave me the push to make the trip, and Jonathan Ornstein, director of the JCC in Krakow, who helped me to plan many of the details. And special thanks to the wonderful mensch, Robert Szczepanik, our Dukla guide, who helped me to connect to my father's past.*