

Remembering the Jewish Community of Kremenets, Ukraine

Remembered by Esther Anastasia

Daughter of Vivian Tartak, member of Temple Israel, Sharon, Massachusetts

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Abram Tartak, late husband of Temple member Vivian Tartak, was born in the Ukraine, in a town called Kremenets, in 1924. He was the eldest of three children with his sister Sima and his brother Adam, the baby of the family. His parents' names were Srul and Leah.

Both sides of Abram's family had lived in that particular town in the Ukraine for 600 years. They had 600 year old dishes and artifacts in their family home in the Jewish quarter. The Jews had migrated to Kremenets and elsewhere to Eastern Europe over six centuries ago to escape persecution in Germany and France.

Kremenets is one of the oldest cities of Ukraine. The first mention of Jews in Kremenets is for the year 1438, when the Grand Duke of Lithuania gave them a charter. The Kremenets Abram knew was not a Fiddler on the Roof type shtetl, but a small town with sophisticated, educated people, including many musicians, cantors, and artists.

Abram's life pre-WWII was definitely comfortable. His father owned a small factory that made roofing supplies. They had their family's historical home in the Jewish quarter of Kremenets, but the family also purchased a summer home out in the country.

Many in the pre-war Jewish community in Kremenets were early Zionists and were part of the movement to return the Jews to the land of Israel where they would be safe from the persecution of Europe. During the 1930's, Jews who were preparing to emigrate to what was then Palestine and who were part of the kibbutz movement came to Abram's country home to learn how to ride horses. His great uncle Aaron Rosenfeld was one of the first scholars to revive Hebrew as not just a language for prayer but also a language for daily life. Aaron published children's books and poetry in Modern Hebrew.

In 1939, Stalin and Hitler divided Europe and Kremenets was taken from Poland and became part of the Soviet Union. Abram's father lost his factory but was kept on as an employee. In 1941, Abram's father sensed very bad times ahead and his instincts were to take his family and go as far east as possible to escape the Nazis. He took his wife and children, and along with one million Polish and Ukrainian Jews, fled to the s summer house and the family had to move to their home in the Jewish quarter, which then became the ghetto. The whole family had to wear the yellow star. There was no more school. All the men and older boys were taken out by the Nazis on work details. After much deliberation, the family decided to separate. Abram's mother stayed with her younger two children and Abram and his father would flee.

Following an agreed-upon plan, during a work detail, Abram and his father suddenly made a run for it. They pulled off the yellow star and fled. The goal was to go as far east as possible.

They reached Tashkent, in Uzbekistan near Iran, then under Soviet control. There were 1,000 Jewish refugees in Tashkent who had made it there on foot, just like they did.

As the war continued, stories and terrifying rumors about what was happening to the Jewish communities in Nazi occupied Europe began to reach Tashkent. The entire Jewish community of Kremenets had been rounded up by the SS and then taken to the woods outside the town

and executed by firing squad. Except for those who left Kremenets before the war and 14 Holocaust survivors, all 15,000 Jews who lived in Kremenets in 1941 were murdered. Abram's mother and the two younger children Adam and Sima and all the extended family were among the victims. The total number of family members killed was 92. The news was delivered by an actual refugee from Kremenets who had escaped at some point after the round up and then hid in the woods and witnessed the entire event before fleeing the area.

After the war was over, Abram and his father Srul returned to their town in the Ukraine. They then decided not to stay in the Ukraine. They escaped by hiding with other refugees in a delivery truck which took them over to Allied occupied Berlin. They went over to the American forces and were given a place to stay in a displaced persons camp. They were given official documents as stateless persons. Their goal was to obtain refugee status and then be allowed to live in the United States, a process which took five years.

Abram and his father Srul came to this country by boat. They lived briefly in Brooklyn, New York, and then settled in Philadelphia. Abram had two daughters, Lana and Esther, and a son, Ben Zion. He worked for many years as an accountant and for 20 proud years as an accountant for the US Department of Defense. He retired in April 1992. He passed away in October 1992.