

SKIERNIEWICE, 4 JUNE 2004

On a sunny afternoon in June, I walked through the old Jewish Quarter of Skierniewice, a small Polish city about an hour southwest of Warsaw. Skierniewice is the place where both my parents were born and lived to young adulthood.

It was not my first visit to Skierniewice. I had stayed there many times as a young child, traveling with my mother to see her family and friends. I have vivid childhood memories of the town and the members of my family, none of whom survived the Holocaust.

Beginning in 1977, I have gone back several times to Skierniewice, looking for traces of its disappeared Jewish population. I walked through vaguely remembered streets, trying to find the homes where I had stayed as a child. I had the address of my maternal grandfather's home on Batorego Street, still inhabited though now very decrepit, but other landmarks I failed to recognize. I searched the streets, back and forth, never sure of just where my other grandfather's butcher shop had stood. Unable to speak Polish and with little knowledge of local history, I made no progress in three visits some years apart.

But the fourth time was different. Most importantly, my husband, children

and oldest grandson accompanied me. Furthermore, thanks to the internet and its genealogical research sites, I had been in contact with other descendants of Skierniewicers, and learned of a book, written in Polish by a non-Jewish local historian, entitled “The History of the Jews of Skierniewice.” It was published in 1993, but is no longer available.

When I knew I would be in Poland again, I made plans to consult the book at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. A cooperative archivist was able to translate and provide the essence of the book, which is based on official documents and on Jewish community records. He looked through the pages, found several references to my mother’s family, and translated them for my benefit. Thus I learned that my mother’s uncles had been a busy lot, active in some of the 22 Jewish political parties that vied for elective office on the city council. One of the uncles actually held a seat on the city council, one of the three allotted to the Jewish Quarter. My uncle Pinhas Indyk, married to my mother’s sister, was reported to have interrupted a synagogue service with an accusation that community funds were being diverted, which was answered with a counter accusation that Pinhas was a known cheater on taxes!

My family figures several times in the

list of those who “left property.” It would seem that in post-Communist Poland I am a large real estate owner in the city, as no one survived on my mother’s side and my cousins and I could claim whatever property there might be from our paternal grandparents. But at my age I am not inclined to start hiring lawyers and translators and fighting with the natives for decayed property in need of extensive repairs and on which back taxes are due.

An affable *landsman* in London had put me in touch with Irving G., an American-born *landsman* who lives in Warsaw part of the year, with his Polish wife, Halina, a professor of English at the Warsaw School of Economics. Irv has spent considerable time, effort and cash on the partial restoration of the “new” Jewish cemetery, a once expansive area with thousands of graves, those of many of my ancestors among them. A small field has been cleared, and about thirty surviving tombstones from the surroundings have been assembled there. From time to time, an errant Hebrew-inscribed stone surfaces somewhere and is added to the collection.

Irving was assisted in this self-imposed task by Tadeusz W., a former Mayor of Skierniewice and a local historian who was 19 when the Germans invaded. Via e-mail, Irving

volunteered to accompany us to Skierniewice, with Halina as translator, and Tadeusz acting as our local guide. On June 4, the five members of my family took off for a memorable visit to the *shtetl* of my ancestors.

In the course of the next few hours we learned more about the fate of the town and its Jewish community. When Germany attacked in 1939, the town was bombed and many houses were consumed by fire. A list of Jews rendered homeless includes the names of some of my relatives. Nearly all the little wooden houses with thatched roofs burned down, which explains my inability to locate my paternal grandfather's residence, not far from the home of my other grandparents, in a more solid building. As for the butcher shop, it took no time to find it. As soon as I mentioned my maiden name, Tadeusz reacted. "Avram?" he asked, then pointed to it. I had passed it repeatedly without recognizing the place. It has been reconfigured into a small store selling children's clothes. We wasted no time buying outfits for our younger grandchildren from the surprised owner, who knew nothing about the store's earlier occupants.

I sat down on the stoop, as I had as a little girl, imagining myself playing there, sometimes in the company of my grandfather. As I remember, the game consisted of catching the swarms of

flies attracted by the raw meat inside.

Tadeusz had known my grandfather and his youngest son, uncle Sheeya, quite well in those pre-war years. “We called them the Iron Gates,” he told me, referring to their legendary physical strength. My uncle had been a star soccer player on the local team.

Tadeusz also revealed a family secret: one of my mother’s sisters, known as Pola, had been highly polonized, very close to her Polish contemporaries and hardly interested in her Jewish ones. My mother had never mentioned this unconventional behavior. Pola eventually married a nice Jewish bookkeeper.

From Batorego street, one can see an old synagogue in the distance, now a warehouse plastered with advertising posters. It was but one of many in Skierniewice, but I imagine that given its proximity to my grandparents’ home, it must be the one to which my mother and her sisters carried food several times a day during the High Holiday period. Her father was a man of deep piety, who remained in prayer inside the synagogue from the start of Rosh Hashana to the end of Yom Kippur, ten days later.

Our tour continued on Sienkiewicza street, to a building in reasonably good condition belonging to my aunt Ides and

her husband Pinhas. They had a large grocery store and a residence above it. With no children of their own, they lavished much attention on me. I liked staying there and playing with the neighborhood children and with the many cats that delivered their catch of dead mice at my feet. According to Tadeusz, until thirty years ago the building still had a sign with their name on it.

We stopped at the small Skierniewice Museum, to look at the vivid photographs of the town's ghetto, the fenced-off Jewish Quarter into which all area Jews were herded. A wooden bridge went from the my grandfather's butcher shop to the other side of the fence, the only way out. The ghetto was dissolved in November 1941, when those still alive were forcibly marched to another ghetto set up in Rawa Mazowiecka, some fifteen miles away. My aunt Ides and uncle Pinhas were no longer alive by then, having been murdered earlier in their hometown. My elderly paternal grandparents were living, and Tadeusz saw them in the crowd leaving town. Many of the marchers never made it to Rawa, collapsing of cold and exhaustion along the road. In view of what awaited those who made it - subsequent shipment to the Warsaw ghetto, and from there to the death camp of Treblinka - I can only hope that my old grandparents met their end at the start

of their exile.

There is a moving marker, in Polish, along the road from Skierniewice to Rawa. It was recently put up by Irving and Tadeusz, with emotional wording composed by Halina, reminding those passing by of the suffering endured by the Jews of Skierniewice on their way to annihilation.

We paid our respects at both Jewish cemeteries, the “old” and the “new.” The old one has only one imposing but crumbling grave still standing, the mausoleum of Rabbi Kalish, known as the *Tzadik* (holy man) of Skierniewice. It is now completely overgrown with brush and no longer visible from the road.

The new one was indeed new to me - I had not been there before. Our attention was called to a recently installed stone, crudely made of cement and already cracking. The story is that a few years ago an American man and his wife came to town, asking where and how soon they could have a stone put up inexpensively, to honor the dead in their family. A grandfather had died and left them an inheritance, on condition that they go to Skierniewice, the deceased’s hometown, and put up a monument to the family’s martyred ancestors. The heir stuck around long enough to have the work done and placed in the cemetery, took a few

photographs, and left in a rush. Presumably, he is now enjoying the good life with his grandfather's money. It only goes to show you... I'm not sure what, exactly.

The realities of the new post-Communist world have reached Skierniewice. Both my parents had lots of stories to tell about the military barracks, which housed more than 3000 soldiers for as long as people could remember. My maternal grandfather made a living selling goods to the military, as did some other Jewish families. The large complex of buildings closed recently, Poland's military needs having changed with membership in NATO and the European Union. I suppose that the local economy is feeling the soldiers' absence.

Tadeusz invited us to his home for refreshments. His apartment is in the Jewish Quarter, across the street from my mother's childhood home. Inside is a "Jewish" oven, with an insulated door in back for keeping cooked foods warm on the Sabbath. I had forgotten this oddity, but instantly remembered seeing it in use at the homes of my various family members.

A place of honor inside the apartment is given over to a photograph of a handsome young man. He is the brother of Tadeusz' wife, who was executed at

sixteen by the Germans during the occupation, for his participation in the underground resistance. His tragic death remains an open wound in this family, and a reminder to us that Poles too suffered greatly under the Nazi boot.

Despite my German birth, I have always considered myself a child of Skierniewice. So intense were the emotions on our visit to Skierniewice that for a few hours my children and grandson too became “Skierniewicers,” more alive to their Eastern European heritage and more grateful for the blessings of their American lives.

Gittel B.