

# THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

Issue Number 1

Autumn 2003

## Hello Ivansker Landsleiters!

The purpose of this communication is to introduce the ***The Ivansk Project*** and ***The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter*** to those who trace their roots to Ivansk (Iwaniska in Polish).

Most of us are second and third generations removed from the shtetl and know very little about the 400 years that our ancestors lived there. Only a handful of Jews who were born in Ivansk are alive today; once they're gone the story of Jewish Ivansk will fade into oblivion. The Ivansk Project was organized to prevent our town's history from being completely lost.

***The Project*** was begun about a year ago: our aim is to document Jewish Life in Ivansk. During the past year we've been accumulating testimony from "original" Ivanskers as well as documents and maps of the town. But we've only just begun to scratch the surface and much more research still needs to be done. We need your help to accomplish our goal and hope that you'll join with us. Ultimately, we will post our findings in the **JewishGen ShtetLinks Project** ([www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org)) and develop a memorial or Yiskor Book to honor our ancestors.

***The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter*** will keep you abreast of our research and invite your participation in *The Project*. Together, we can acquire deeper insights into who we are and where we came from and also preserve our heritage for future generations.

Jews first settled in Ivansk in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and by the 1930s approximately 3,000 lived in the shtetl, constituting about two-thirds of the population. No Jews live in Ivansk anymore: in October 1942 about 1,800 were deported to their deaths in Treblinka. Only a small number survived the war. About 300 ran to the woods just before deportation but almost all were recaptured. Others escaped to Russia or fled into the forests and joined the underground. Many were enslaved in Nazi labor camps but managed to hang on until liberation. And a few were given refuge by Polish Christians.

Even before the war life was never easy in Ivansk: for most, it was a struggle just to survive. There was no reason to believe that things would ever get better and beginning in the early 1900s a continual stream of emigrants sought a better life

in distant lands, including Canada, Israel, United States, Columbia and Argentina. Most prospered in their adopted countries, and undreamt of opportunities became available to their children and their children's children. With time Ivansk became a distant memory. In fact, many of our parents and grandparents wanted to forget about Poland and rarely spoke about their lives in the shtetl. Consequently, few of us know very much about the history of our families before they left their homes in Poland.

It is amazing how many Ivansker descendents have been identified since *The Project* began. The vast majority live in the Toronto area. Others can found in the USA, Israel, South America and who knows where else. Several Ivanskers have contacted members of *The Project's Action Committee*: their numbers have grown so large that it is difficult to keep track of them on an individual basis. The *e-Newsletter* will enhance our ability to stay in touch with one another. In addition, we want to reach out to other Ivanskers who are not known to us. Please help us get in touch with these people (instructions on how to do this will be given below).

The first critical step in documenting the story of our ancestral community is to secure testimony from those who were born in the shtetl. Time is not on our side and we need to mount a concerted effort to reach as many as possible. We want to learn about their culture, their joys and sorrows and the rhythm of their daily lives in Ivansk before the outbreak of the war in 1939. We want to try to grasp what happened to them during The Shoah. Finally, we want to hear how they persevered and carried on after the war.

*The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter* will feature topics that are relevant to our community. For instance:

POTENTIAL TOPICS	COMMENTS
Names/addresses of living	Ivanskers and their descendents
History of Ivansk	General history of Ivansk before 1939 and history of Ivansker Jews including list of names, occupations, etc
Archival Records	LDS archives, Polish archives, Israeli archives
Daily Shtetl Life	Birth, Marriage, Death, Work, School, Shule, Market Day, Entertainment, etc
Religion	Shades of Orthodoxy, Observance of Shabbat and Holidays, Influence of Rabbis, The Shule, The Besmedresh, The Mikvah, etc
Artifacts	Ivansk maps and photos, birth certificates, postcards, personal documents (eg, passport, military papers, marriage certificate, etc)
Cemetery	Description of the desecrated Jewish cemetery.

	Names of those who were buried in cemetery as well as cemeteries in other countries
Emigration before War II	Reasons; Time frame(s); Arrangements; Routes; Destinations; Photos (ship; manifest, shipboard; Portals: HIAS, Naturalization, etc
Landsmanschaften	Ivansk Mutual Benefit Society (Toronto) and other organizations (eg, shules, clubs) Establishment of Ivansker Community in Toronto and other cities
Holocaust	History of Nazi occupation. Stories from survivors.
Post Holocaust Emigration	Rescue from Europe; Destinations, Barriers, Reception, Establishing new life, etc
Articles/Documents	"Ivansk Pinchas Hakehillot"; etc
Family Histories	From original Ivanskers and their descendents
Polish-Jewish Relations	Before and during the war.
Family Tree Forum	Access to genealogical data via personal and web links
Bibliography	References and acknowledgments
Ivansk Today	Personal diary of visitors to Poland and Ivansk (photos, drawings, etc). Travel advice for those who want to visit the shtetl.
Links	Sites related to the shtetl and its people (eg, immigration portals, family trees, shtetl sites, Holocaust history, museums, etc)
Guestbook	Inviting comments, critiques, suggestions, contact, etc
Ivansk Humor	Vignettes about characters and life in Ivansk
Ivansk Recipes	How to make gefilte fish, cholent, peh-chah; matzo brei, etc
Question and Answer Column	
Announcements	Conferences, exhibits, film festivals, book reviews, etc
Editorials	

### **How you can participate in The Ivansk Project!**

We cannot achieve our goal without your help.

Please join us in writing the story of our ancestors.

Here is what you can do:

- ? We need to reach anyone who was born in Ivansk and get their testimony. Please provide us with their names, addresses and telephone numbers. If

they are family members or friends, consider whether you would like to help us record their oral testimony. We will provide guidelines for conducting these interviews.

- ? Send us the names and addresses (include email and postal addresses) of other people (including your own children) who would be interested in being placed on our mailing list.

Right now we are only able to send electronic mail, but we will try to secure funds to establish regular postal mailings for those without access to computers.

- ? Contact us with your suggestions and volunteer to help us with expertise you have that is relevant to *The Project*.
- ? Contribute stories or material on any of the topics listed above for publication in the *e-Newsletter*.
- ? We are especially interested in acquiring copies of photos taken in Ivansk. As yet, we do not have a single image of the town when it was still inhabited by Jews. Copies of immigration certificates, travel documents, etc would also be welcomed.

### How you can contact us

The names and email addresses of the members of *The Project's Action Committee* are listed below. You can contact any of them with your ideas, questions or information. Let us know what you think about *The Project*.

<b>Ivansk Project Action Committee</b>		
<b>Fred Apel</b>	USA	<a href="mailto:fredapel@usa.net">fredapel@usa.net</a>
<b>Sydney Kasten</b>	Israel	<a href="mailto:kostensl@012.net.il">kostensl@012.net.il</a>
<b>David Lederman</b>	Israel	<a href="mailto:dalederman@bezeqint.net">dalederman@bezeqint.net</a>
<b>Ellen and Sonny Monheit</b>	Canada	<a href="mailto:sonnell@rogers.com">sonnell@rogers.com</a>
<b>Lisa Newman</b>	Canada	<a href="mailto:lisa.newman.a@utoronto.ca">lisa.newman.a@utoronto.ca</a>
<b>Betty Provizer Starkman</b>	USA	<a href="mailto:bettejoy@aol.com">bettejoy@aol.com</a>
<b>Norton Taichman (Project Co-coordinator)</b>	USA	<a href="mailto:nstaichman@comcast.net">nstaichman@comcast.net</a>
<b>Arthur Zimmerman</b>	Canada	<a href="mailto:arthurz@look.ca">arthurz@look.ca</a>

### What is the Publication Schedule of the *e-Newsletter*?

It depends. For the immediate future we have sufficient material to merit publication on a regular (bimonthly?) basis. But in the long term we will need additional material to maintain the interest of our readership. Please help by forwarding anything you think might be suitable for inclusion in the *e-Newsletter* (see List of Topics above).

## **A Visit to Ivansk (April, 1996)**

**by Norton Taichman**

**(Narberth, Pennsylvania)**

My father (Louis; Lemel in Yiddish) was born in Ivansk in 1906 and immigrated to Toronto in 1920, together with his mother (Rose; Rhuda); older sister (Lilli; Rivka Leiyah) and younger brother (Max; Myer). My grandfather (Chamol Teichman) preceded his family arriving in Canada in 1910.

My father had no love loss for the Old World and I grew up knowing little about the shtetl or my dad's boyhood. After his death this void began to gnaw at me and I felt that a visit to Ivansk might help to fill some of the blanks. The opportunity presented itself in 1996 when I was on sabbatical in London, England.

In March an announcement appeared in *The Jewish Chronicle* (the oldest and most widely read Jewish newspaper in the UK) indicating that a local synagogue was organizing a trip to Poland to take part in *The March of the Living*. Together with 30 fellow travelers my wife (Louise) and I took off from Heathrow on April 14. As our jetliner flew eastward my mind raced across the centuries of Jewish history in Poland, and at the risk of gross oversimplification I shall try to briefly summarize some of my thoughts.

Beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries waves of Ashkenazim migrated to the eastern lands because they were being subjected to intolerable persecution in the German Empire. At that time "Poland" was a haven for Jews. They were welcomed and granted special economic, social and autonomous (self government) privileges by the ruling nobility. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the Jewish community expanded and prospered, and with time Poland evolved to become the epicenter of Ashkenazik culture in the Diaspora.

But by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the peasants and the Church became increasingly resentful of the Jewish presence. The serfs regarded Jews as lackeys of the oppressive nobility while the Church accused them of deicide and undermining its authority. To make matters worse, Jews were charged with ritual murder of Christian children and of collaborating with the Swedes who had invaded Poland in 1654. This growing hostility sparked anti-Jewish riots and pogroms and established a pattern of Judeophobia that continued to intensify in Poland over the next 400 years.

In 1772-1795 the status of the Jews dramatically changed when Kingdom of Poland was partitioned by Russia, Austria and Prussia. Most of the Jews lived under Russian rule where conditions were especially harsh. The privileges previously accorded to them were rescinded and they were subjected to increasing governmental pressure to transform into “useful” subjects and to convert and assimilate into the general population. But the vast majority of Polish Jews resisted all attempts to subvert their identity. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish emancipation was granted throughout Western Europe, but in the feudal east the “old order” prevailed well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jews were scorned as alien parasites, exploiters of the peasants and fomenters of liberalism, socialism and revolution.

At the end of the First World War Polish independence was reestablished. Over 3 million Jews (approximately 10% of the population) lived in the new republic. The Treaty of Versailles supposedly guaranteed their rights but long-standing anti-Jewish prejudices remained entrenched in the Polish psyche and intense nationalist attitudes had become dominant features in political and economic life. There was a growing sentiment that the “Jewish problem” could only be solved by getting rid of the Jews.

In 1939 the invasion of Poland by the Germans signaled the beginning of the end of Jewish life in Poland and in other parts of Europe. And by 1944 Poland had become the world’s largest Jewish graveyard. The Poles also suffered cruelly under the Nazis, and it is important to remember that a small but significant number of courageous Poles risked their lives to save Jews. However, most remained indifferent to the plight of their neighbors and many assisted in the roundup or the murder of Jews. Less than 10% of Poland’s Jews survived the war, and when they returned to their homes they were often greeted with scorn and violence by their neighbors. Most emigrated to the United States and Israel; nonetheless, state- and church-sponsored xenophobia were still endemic in Poland long after the country was essentially free of Jews.

We had left England bathed in spring sunshine and color but upon landing in Warsaw we were welcomed by dark, ominous snow clouds and bone-chilling winds. As we boarded the tour bus our guide announced that we were heading northeast. Our destination: Treblinka. We hadn’t been in Poland more than an hour and already we were confronted by the enormity of what had happened here.

Between July 1942 and April 1943 over 800,000 Jews were gassed in Treblinka. Today, an eerie silence pervades the scene where indescribable pain was inflicted on innocent people. A mass grave and a large stone monument dominate the center of the field and on the periphery, hundreds of symbolic tombstones have been erected: most bear the name of a town from which Jews were deported to this horrible place.

My wife and I searched for the Iwaniska metziva (sp??) but after about 20 minutes I was ready to give up. Then, Louise spotted it: a stark, grey boulder pointing accusingly towards the sky. We stood in silence; no words could express the depths of our loneliness and despair.

Over the next 5 days we traveled to other extermination camps including Auschwitz-Birkenau where we joined the *March of the Living*. Thousands of young people paid homage to those who had been murdered and vowed never to wear the yellow star again. We were very proud to be in their company. In Warsaw, Cracow and other towns we explored former Jewish areas and ghettos, Jewish cemeteries and shules. No one will ever fully understand the madness that engulfed Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, but my trip to Poland brought me closer than ever to appreciating the scope of what had happened to our people.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the journey the weather markedly improved melting the remnants of snow from the hills and fields. Louise and I temporarily broke away from our companions to visit Ivansk. We hired a “guide” through Orbiz, the largest travel agency in Poland. That turned out to be a mistake: Orbiz charged an exorbitant fee (approximately \$300.00 US) and its guide was inexperienced, lacking the instincts and the insights to undertake his assignment. The drive south from Warsaw took about 3 hours, and as we passed through Apt (in Polish, Opatow; the home of my mother’s parents), I knew we were only minutes away from our destination.

You can view some photos taken during our trip to Ivansk.  
Log on to the web: <http://nortontaichman.photosite.com/Ivansk/>  
Click on “View Chapter 1” to enter the site.  
Click on individual photos to enlarge images.

Gently rolling hills and dark forests surround Ivansk. In the fields farmers were just beginning spring plowing with horse or donkey. Early spring is the good time to visit the shtetl; during the summer (our second visit in August 2000) lush green growth obscures many interesting features of the town. For instance the town square is luxuriant with shrubs and trees that obstruct a panoramic view of the scene. More important, portions of the Jewish cemetery are inaccessible due to the overgrowth of dense bramble (more on this below).

The first impression of Ivansk is that it has been frozen in time. The roads are paved and there’s indoor plumbing and electricity and the town is clean as a whistle. But its pulse is barely perceptible. Overall, it’s a pretty dreary place. A small library is the only evidence of cultural activity; however, there may be other communal facilities we were not aware of. Aside from agricultural pursuits there is little evidence of other commercial pursuits or services and many men have been unemployed since the fall of the communist regime. (A business directory of Ivansk was published in 1929. At that time the shtetl was alive with numerous

artisans and tradesmen. The directory will be published in a future *e-Newsletter*.) At best, health care is marginal in today's Ivansk; many adults have gaping spaces in their jaws with remnants of protruding, broken down teeth.

The villagers we spoke to through the guide were friendly, although a few kept their distance lest we were returning to reclaim property. Some of the older folks remembered their Jewish neighbors and said that the two peoples got along with each other. However, it was obvious that both lived in different, distant worlds. For instance, the fire hall stands on the site of the former shule. There's a plaque on the wall dedicated to several local inhabitants who were killed by the Nazis. There's no mention of the murdered Jews or the fact that a house of prayer once stood here. I don't think this is simply a manifestation of anti-Semitism: it also reflects the long-standing social and cultural gulf that separated Jews and Poles.

The Jewish burial ground is (was) about 2 miles outside the town off the Road to Rakow. It is situated on the gentle slope, surrounded by ploughed fields, but you'll never find it unless someone shows you where it is. A peasant woman who we met by chance on the road took us there: she lives on a farm adjacent to the cemetery. She had lots to say about what happened to the Jews under German occupation but we missed most of it, as our guide seemed to be uncomfortable by some of her revelations. We suspect that she told him of deplorable actions on the part of some Poles during the war.

The cemetery is completely destroyed. Its boundary wall and all its tombstones are gone. The main section is overgrown with scrub and prickly bramble. We were able to creep through the barrier because it was early spring: during our summer visit in 2000 this part of the cemetery is impenetrable. We discovered a few headstone foundations and small, broken flakes of tombstones. I wanted to take these fragments with me but thought I might be perpetrating the desecration. Now I am sorry that I didn't rescue these artifacts for safekeeping. Unbelievably, vandals armed with metal detectors had been digging in the earth for gold or other valuables supposedly buried in the graves of the "rich" Jews. The woman showed us where several Jews had been massacred by the Nazis and buried in an unmarked grave. We recited The Kaddish, lit a Yahrzeit candle and placed a wooden marker in the ground.

As a consequence of *The Project's* on-going research we know that on the day before they were deported the Jews of Ivansk gathered in the cemetery to bury their torahs, siddurim and other sacred objects. An eyewitness account of this terrible moment will be published in a future issue of the *e-Newsletter*. In addition, we have testimony to indicate that the Poles destroyed the cemetery after the Germans had been driven from Ivansk by the advancing Soviets. Presumably, they wanted to erase all traces of a Jewish presence and in this they succeed.



Needless to say my trip to Poland and to Ivansk was a very heavy experience. Before undertaking such a journey one must learn how to say The Kaddish. I was emotionally drained for weeks after returning to England. But it was something I had to do and it has changed my life. I now feel more directly involved in the history of our people in general and my ancestors in particular. The journey was the stimulus for undertaking The Ivansk Project. As mentioned, I have returned to Ivansk to gather more impressions of the town and to search for any records of its former Jewish inhabitants. Sadly, there are no relevant archives in the town or in other archival repositories. Apparently, the records that were kept in the town were lost or destroyed during the war. Thus, we are almost entirely dependent upon our own resources to write the history of Jewish Life in Ivansk.

My return trip also had a deep impact on my attitude towards Poland. While not forgetting the past, I have reason to hope that Polish-Jewish relations are headed in a more positive and constructive direction. I plan to report on my second trip in a future edition of the *e-Newsletter*.

If you've been to Ivansk, please share your experience with us!

### **The Kielce-Radom Special Interest Group Journal**

The K-R Journal publishes articles relating to Jewish history and genealogy in the Gubernarias of Kielce and Radom of the Kingdom of Poland (defined by the boundaries of 1867-1917). The Journal appears quarterly and presents interesting accounts of Jewish life as well as birth, marriage and death records in the shtetls that shared the same geography as Ivansk. The Journal is an invaluable resource. By joining the group you'll receive a subscription to the Journal: annual dues (in US funds) are: USA (\$26.00); Canada (\$30.00); Elsewhere (\$37.00).

You can obtain more information by email: [debraverman@hotmail.com](mailto:debraverman@hotmail.com) or by visiting the K-R website: [www.jewishgen.org/krsig](http://www.jewishgen.org/krsig)

Please send us the names of those who might be interested in receiving the *e-Newsletter*. Also, please get in touch with us if you have questions, suggestions or want to contribute material for publication in the *e-Newsletter*.

If you do not want to receive the *e-newsletter*, send us an email placing "unsubscribe" in the subject heading.