

Memories make our eyes brimming with tears

Lidia Jagielska talked with Zyta Wegner, the author of the list of craftsmen from Skępe and the author of the book entitled "Rodem ze Skępego", about the influence of her publication on the fate of Skępe Jews and their descendants.

- 10 years ago you took up the task of preparing a list of craftsmen from Skępe and then an album of the residents of Skępe from 1896-1957. Both in the list and in the book "Rodem ze Skępego" published in 2007 there was a place for Jews from Skępe. This is evidence of not only a great local patriotism but also knowledge of the history and objectivity of the author. Today we already know that people from all around the world appreciate your work because you reveal the history of their families. What made you do this work, what are the changes in the lives of people scattered all around the world?

- There were many Jewish residents in Skępe. My parents reminisced about them. My sisters played with Jewish children. They were among us and worked with us. So I couldn't omit them. They were a part of Skępe. I only heard about them but Mr. Anotni Moderski, who was born the same year as my sister, that is in 1922, knew and remembered them very well. His memories and the documents, diplomas, and mementos left by people, which I found in the attic, resulted in the restoration of the history of our town. By analyzing eight streets, one after another, I managed to find where and in what homes Jews lived. I also found their names and occupations. Such a list of craftsmen has been available since 2004 in the conference hall of the Town Hall in Skępe, and the book "Rodem ze Skępego" has circulated around the world. Until October 1994 we were convinced that no one Jewish from Skępe survived.

- I understand that in 1994, after many years, the first Jewish family established contact with you?

- Yes, a daughter of baker Podrygał, who lived next to my parents, came to Skępe. It turned out that she was the only one who survived Oświęcim and settled in Israel. Their house is still here but is intended for demolition. She came to Skępe to show her children where she had lived. They were in Oświęcim before. Then Naomi Wasserman told me that Oświęcim was their cemetery. Now I heard that from other Jews.

- How old was Naomi Podrygał Wasserman when she left Skępe?

- She doesn't know exactly whether she was born in 1925 or 1924. The Town Hall has only birth certificates of Poles. During that time the equivalent of today's birth certificate was baptism. She also didn't find any information in Lipno and in the provincial archive. What she took from Poland was the number on her arm she was marked with in the camp. After many years she mentioned the names of her siblings and parents in her home. She cried, prayed, and reminisced about her childhood with my sister. She visited Skępe twice. I sent her an ornamental plate manufactured for Jews before the war by the porcelain plant in Włocławek. She sent us wishes for our Christmas. Now she is dead. Memories make everyone's eyes brimming with tears. I will never forget these conversations. Women and men cry.

- And such conversations have already taken place at your home several times because Skępe was visited by other families of local Jews.

- Yes. One year ago the granddaughter of baker Adler from Rynek came to Skępe. Now it can be seen how important it was – he described in detail in my list of craftsmen the names of the streets and the numbers of the homes occupied by people. After that visit in Skępe it turned out that they are relatives of Wasserman's. They didn't know before that they survived.

- How did they come to your house?

- They were looking for information about Jews in Skępe and came across my book and someone told them where I lived. They knew Skępe from stories only and wanted to see where their grandparents lived. They were very touched that they could hold the door handle of the old home in which their grandfather lived. My husband helped them find information about her grandfather Adler. Once they came back to the US they immediately contacted Naomi Wasserman and it turned out that after 60 years they had found a very close family.

- So you are a happy "middle-woman". Do the descendants of Adler keep in touch with you?

- We are in contact by letters. They promised they would come again because memories are most important for them.

- And in April this year you had another descendant of local Jews as guests?

- It was an unique visit. They came to our commune to find the Puskiewicz family in Bógzapłać village. A grandniece of Ryfka Pozmanter come to Skępe. She doesn't speak Polish and she talked with us with the help of a translator. She asked for help. Despite the fact that Bógzapłać is a very small village with only 5 houses it wasn't easy to find any information. She didn't remember much information. She remembered that it was a village near the Sarnowskie lake and that there was a family of famers who hid a Jewish woman during the war.

- Does the woman who was offered help from the farmers from the neighborhood of Skępe live?

- Yes. She is about 84 years old. They had a clothes shop in Skępe and in 1939 they went to Warsaw, where Ryfka received documents. She was a blonde and looked like a Pole. Unfortunately, in the capital city they were in danger and they came back to the neighborhood of Skępe. They came across famers near a lake and found shelter with the Puskiewicz family who knew her parents well. Ryfka said: "find shelter for us or kills us". The famers helped them. They were hidden in a stable but were also invited to eat supper, have a bath or sleep. However, there was someone who blew the whistle on them. And one night a military policeman came to their house. Puskiewicz told them that the sleeping women were his cousins from Warsaw who were to leave the following day. Indeed, Ryfka and her daughter Fela left soon after for Germany with the help of Puskiewicz's daughter who worked in Germany at the time. She has never come to the neighborhood of Skępe again. Now she wants to find those great people.

- And asked you for help. Have you already managed to find someone from the Puskiewicz family?

- It was a very difficult task. There are no signs and directions on how to get to the small village. I and my husband wandered around and we managed to find the person with the help of a woman from the village. We found that there was only one daughter of Puskiewicz who lives there. She is 84 years old and doesn't remember much. Their house no longer exists. We talked with the residents and neighbours of the village as well as with the village head. What is peculiar is that all people who had helped Jews, found shelter for them and had contact with them reacted the same way – they cry.

- There is no house. There are also less people who remember and want to help the descendants of their neighbours, regardless of their nationality. Fortunately, you are here, there is also the list of craftsmen in the Town Hall

and the book "Rodem ze Skępe". What surprises most of the Jews who now visit Skępe and its neighbourhood.

- Bobbie and Mike said that it was an exciting experience to walk on the same streets as their grandmother and family. They visited the Jewish cemetery but there is no single sign or plate. It is sad. It is a very emotional experience for them. They also met the Mayor of Skępe, Andrzej Gatyński, who welcomed them in a very friendly way and offered his help in searching for any traces of their ancestors. They talked with my sister who remembers Jewish families. They didn't hide their emotions. They were very touched when they saw the list of craftsmen in the Town Hall, in which they found their ancestors among the residents of Skępe. It was an amazing time for them because they understood that we still remember about their ancestors. They took a photo with me with the list of craftsmen in the background.

- Have the relatives of Ryfka Pozmanter already contacted you after returning to Eagle River, Wisconsin?

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- Yes. We received a letter from them. They are delighted and they still recall their visit. The most exciting information is that once they returned to the United States they contacted Elyse Smith from the Adler family (editorial note - she visited Skępe last year) and they not only talked for hours but also found that they shared a common cousin.

- So all roads lead to Skępe and it seems that you will soon have other guests.

- It is very nice. Everyone contacts us. They send pictures and promise they will come next time. However, the most important thing is that they find traces of their ancestors. If we can my husband and I try to help. There were a lot of Jewish families in and around Skępe. So there were tragic situations as well. We still get to know new facts. When looking for Puskiewicz family we found information about the gehenna of the Jewish family Lichtenstein, who lived about 3km from the Bógzapłać villigate, namely in Rojewo. The knowledge of history is very important. Too bad that there is still a lot of people who don't know the fate of their families and cities.

- People from all around the world ask you for help. Do local schools or residents of the city use your knowledge?

- I'm not invited for any meetings at schools in our city so I don't know whether my knowledge goes to the young. The book "Rodem ze Skępego" is available, the pictures which show the objects of old Skępe, which don't exist now, can be seen in Rynek, and there is also the list of craftsmen in the Town Hall. It's difficult to say whether the young use it.

This is an interview with Zyta Wegner prepared by Lidia Jagielska.