

Memorial Anniversary for a Jewish Town in Poland

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Translated from Yiddish by Mark Froimowitz

translator's comments are indicated by []

Lord of the Universe!

*Here people lived and worked, danced and sang!
Here they used to curse, here they used to bless ...*

*Here people cried and laughed and screamed,
Here they rocked their children in cradles,
Here children to their mothers clung.
Here at weddings, they made merry ...*

Lord of the Universe!

*Was it here that Jews pulled the golden thread for
generations?*

Was it here that Jews forged the golden chain?

The above mentioned lines are from the poem "Shadows from the Warsaw Ghetto", written by the martyred Jewish-Soviet poet Itzik Feffer seeing the destruction in Poland. Although the words were written for the city of Warsaw, Jewish Warsaw, these lines apply to every Jewish city, town, and village in Poland from before the Second World War. Not only Warsaw, the Jewish Warsaw, was destroyed in the Nazi devastation. Also wiped out were hundreds of cities and towns, Jewish cities and towns, from the Polish landscape. The same can be said for other countries in Europe.

I purposely did not give above the name of my town that I want to lament. The reason is that hundreds of Jewish readers of this journal, seeing the heading above the article, will themselves know the heading. Although, I will specifically write about my town, the same can be written about many, many Jewish places in Poland. Life in these communities, with certain small differences, was essentially the same. The same Jewish people, the same way of life, almost the same institutions and organizations, and certainly the same Jewish hearts and souls. For these Jewish cities and towns, it is now 50 years since they were destroyed. For a few, perhaps 49 years, but for all, the last fateful decree was given in the fall of 1942.

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The name of my town is Stopnitz. Where is this town to be found? In joking words, one can say in "the estates of the king of poverty". How large was Stopnitz? As large as "the small print in a small prayer book". The true answer to the first question is in central Poland, the province of Kielce, the county of Busko. How large was it? As large as the world, since many residents of Stopnitz lived their entire lives there and this was the only world they knew.

According to the official archives, there were already Jewish inhabitants in Stopnitz in the year 1663, about 12-15 families. In 1827, there were already 1,014 Jews there. That means an estimated 49% of the general population. And this is how the Jewish population grew from year to year and from generation to generation. Until, at the beginning of the Second World War, Stopnitz had 2,600 Jewish souls. In the first years of the war, the number of Jewish inhabitants increased when Jews from larger cities in the surrounding area came here to seek a more "secure refuge". According to official numbers, there were 5,300 Jews there in April 1942.

I left Stopnitz in October 1942. "Left" is certainly not the correct expression for my parting with the town. One could use "dragged from", "chased out", "driven away", and other such similar expressions. Nevertheless, I, together with a multitude of 1,500 young Jewish men and women, went "voluntarily" to a work camp - Skarzysko. The pretext was that, by our going away, the Jews left behind would remain alive in a ghetto in the town. This was an enormous lie. Not long after, the remaining Jews were driven out of the town so that by January 1943, Stopnitz was "*Judenrein*" [free of Jews].

No matter how small Stopnitz was, it possessed so much that it is simply difficult to relate. The town had Chassidim, *Misnaggdim* [the

opponents of Chassidism], and the non-religious, dignified old men with long, gray beards and lively, beautiful young people. We had our share of scholars, fools, and crazy people, our share of those who worked with their hands, rich merchants, and poor people. There was a Zionist Organization, a "Betar", "Agudah", "Mizrachi", and even an illegal Communist movement, a *shul* [synagogue], a house of study, *shitblech* [small Chassidic synagogues], a *mikveh* [ritual bathhouse], a slaughterhouse, meeting places, and libraries. Jewish newspapers such as "*Haint*" [Today], "*Haintike Naves*" [Today's News], "Moment", Jewish youth journals and other publications that used to come from Warsaw, as well as Jewish books, were grabbed by Jewish readers, large and small. More than one *Shabbos* [Sabbath/Saturday] afternoon did young girls spend reading weekly romance novels and fantasize about a world that they only knew from the written word.

I am reminded of the market days when the market was packed with horses and wagons from the surrounding villages. Male and female peasants used to bring their products to sell and to buy the things they needed from Jewish small businesses and artisans. And who can forget the *Shabbos* afternoon walks in the market when boys and girls would eye each other from a distance. The family walks, when father, mother, and children, dressed in their *Shabbos* clothing would, on nice summer days, go for a walk to the "*Pniokel*" [brook], around the "*Toomeleh*" [small Catholic chapel], and around other parts of the town or to drop in on relatives for a glass of tea with sugar, listening to the stories that they would tell there. Children use to go to grandpa and grandma or uncle and aunt to receive a *Shabbos* fruit. An apple from the aunt and a pinch on the cheek from uncle and out to play behind the butcher shops. *Shabbos* after prayers when the youth of the town carried the *cholent* [*Shabbos* stew that cooks very slowly on low heat] from the bakery. We observed the size of the pots in order to rate the "wealth" of the "*balebuste*" [housewife].

I remember the rainy autumn days when the gutters overflowed and the surrounding earth was covered in mud where more than one left a boot or galosh. The winter frost that "painted" flowers on the frozen window panes. The high piles of snow that often covered the "*khatas*" [dwellings] up to their chimneys. If one had a few pieces of dry wood and heated the tile oven, it was truly a pleasure for large and small. And not to mention having a few "*zshemekes*" (potatoes) to bake in the hot embers, that was a taste of the Garden of Eden.

Understandably, the main language was Yiddish with a sprinkling of Polish from the so-called "intelligentsia" and a little Hebrew from the lovers of Zion. We did not have movies or a theater in Stopnitz and also very few radios except for those that we put together ourselves. From time to time, "itinerant" actors, Jewish and non-Jewish, would come and there was a performance. This usually took place in the hall of the firefighters with hastily nailed together wings and decorations. The entire town would at that time go to the "Theater".

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It is now a half century since my town shared the same fate as hundreds of other cities and towns in Poland. When I, on the day of my departure, sitting on a truck, threw my last glance at the town, at the high cross of the church, the picture of the town was etched in my memory forever. There it will remain together with the memories, good and bad, that reminds that "There Once Was".

In 1942, there was an end to Jewish life in Poland as we knew it. In his poem, Itzik Feffer continues.

... no longer are Jews here. Here others now live,
who brought Hell on earth.

... They sit at our tables and guzzle,
They lie in our beds and sleep ...
... In our boots to churches they run...

And we all know how true these lines are about my birth town.

Every year our society comes together, like many other town *landsmanshaften* to say a public *Kaddish* [Jewish prayer for the dead] for the Jewish holy martyrs of the town, for our nearest and dearest, for those who haven't even left a memory of themselves. It is understandable that the name of the town, Stopnitz, or the names of hundreds of other settlements are thereby remembered. However, we don't sufficiently mourn the living place but only its Jewish inhabitants. Today, I will lament the town, the

physical place, on the 50th memorial anniversary. You will still presumably find today a small dot on the Polish map, a dot as big as the head of a pin and, near it, the inscription "Stopnica". However, it is not the Jewish Stopnitz, where I was born, where I lived my first young years, the place of my learning in *cheder* [religious school] and my education in school, where I and many of my town once lived. Jewish Stopnitz no longer exists. The one that I still remember so well and that will remain in my memories until the day of my death.

Yisgadal v'yiskadash ... [the first words of the *Kaddish*], my Jewish town of Stopnitz.

From *Kartki z przeszlosci ruchu ludowego w bylým powiecie stopnickim*

[Pages on the History of the Peasant Movement in the former Stopnica county]

(Warszawa: Ludowa Spoldzielnia Wydawnicza, 1965), pages 43-46.

by Franciszek Faliszewski

Translated from Polish by Halina Brown

The policy of extermination was directed with full brutality against the Jewish population.

There were approximately 25,000 Jews in the Stopnica powiat during the occupation. Like in other areas, it all started with separating the Jewish population through identification marks. Each Jew over the age of 10 was required to wear on their arm a six-cornered star. This was followed in quick succession with public orders forcing Jews to carry out various types of labor, initially in the vicinity of their residences. Germans took every opportunity to demean and humiliate these people, including physical torture. The instances of outright thievery became more frequent. German dignitaries of various types within the country's government, Gestapo officials, and policemen supplied themselves with the best merchandise in Jewish shops without paying. Jews were systematically forced to pay ransoms. A Jew Taubenblatt was in charge of bringing Jewish contributions and ransoms to the county authorities in Busko-Zdrój.

One of the ways to harm the Jewish population was by depriving it of food rations and putting restrictions on food purchases. For the poor, these actions were equivalent to a sentence of death by starvation. Shooting unarmed people for insignificant transgressions was a common form of persecution.

In 1941, I became friendly with Henryk Nozyc, a young Jewish intellectual in Stopnica. Having access to the underground press "Rocha", I shared each issue with him. I hoped to spark in this way his interest in the existence and activities of the underground organization. Regretfully, our contacts never went beyond this sharing of the publications, and over time, they died out.

The final act of the Jewish tragedy arrived. In October of 1942, Germans started the transport of Stopnica county Jews to extermination camps. One sunny Sunday afternoon in October, a gang of drunk German soldiers herded into Stopnica a large group of Jews from Staszów, on the border of the Sandomierz

powiat. From here, these extraordinarily exhausted and run down people were taken further on to a train in Szczucin.

The 23 kilometer road between Staszów and Stopnica was a ghastly sight, strewn with the corpses of men, women, and children. During one momentary rest break in Stopnica, a Jewish woman went into labor, howling in pain. She was mercilessly shot.

The extermination of Stopnica's Jewish population commenced on October 5. My Jewish neighbors spent the preceding night away from their homes. However, they returned the following evening. My neighbors, like other Stopnica Jews, were victims of a deadly hoax. On that day, the community representative supplied Germans with a large bribe, receiving in return the assurance that the liquidation orders would be suspended for the time being. So pacified, the population returned to their homes at night, only to be rounded up the next morning on the town's main square. Streets and alleys of the town were covered with the bodies of innocent people. The German executioners showed no mercy. An occasional child ran into the street from one of the abandoned houses - left there purposely or forgotten - dressed in a meager shirt and crying out for the mother. Such children were shot on the spot.

Hipolit Zieknica and I witnessed an episode when two German soldiers led into a path toward the cemetery a young Jewish woman with a small child, both discovered in a hideaway in a bale of hay. At some moment, the soldier stopped, letting her go ahead, and shot her dead, with a helpless child standing by. The soldier then walked up to the child, lifted it and placed it on top of the dead mother, and then shot it. When the murder was completed, the soldier walked away calmly with a self-satisfied expression on his face.

One Jewish woman left her little daughter at a Catholic cemetery. The crying child was discovered by a casual visitor and taken to the nearby hospital. The nuns working at the hospital took the girl under their wings, and shortly, she was taken in by a childless married couple in Busko-Zdrój. A few Jews managed to hide with peasant families in the nearby villages. A few people, such as the sisters Cukier [Amazingly, this seems to be referring to our Coordinator's mother and aunt. However, they were not in Starachowice but at the Skarżysko slave labor camp. See *Kielce-Radom SIG Journal*, IV:3] and Miss Redlich from Stopnica, survived by working as forced laborers at Starachowice Works. Several slave workers, including the brothers Redlich from Stopnica, escaped from the Starachowice Works. They survived the German occupation by joining the partisans.

Stopnica peasants lent the Jews a helping hand by providing food and, during the tragic days of extermination, by hiding them. Such acts were punishable with death on the helper or even their whole family. Despite such terrifying punishments, many Poles were willing to risk their lives to help persecuted Jews.

According to (Magister) Smazynski, there were 26,136 Jews in residence in the Stopnica county during the occupation. Only a few dozen survived. The rest were murdered.