

Memorial Day in Staszow

WHEN Dr. Maciej Zarebski, chairman of the Staszow (Poland) Cultural Association, introduced me to the assembly at the local high school, he described me as "a native American whose cantor father once sang in the synagogue here, and whose grandfather carved smoking pipes in a little shop in the Market Square."

Jack Goldfarb

I was at the school to inaugurate an annual lecture in my parents' ancestral *shtetl* in memory of my 30 Staszow relatives who perished in the Holocaust.

These memorial lectures followed by open discussions are my attempt to get the young people of Staszow to share with me a remembrance of their town's vanished Jews. On the eve of World War II, Staszow had 5,000 Jews, comprising half of the town's population. Today there are no known Jews living in that picturesque rural town in southern Poland — whose 400-year-old Jewish community had counted among its native sons the great cantor Yossele Rosenblatt. The town's Jews, along with 2,000 other Jews from the area, were confined to the ghetto the Germans established there in June 1942. The following November 8, the Germans massacred several hundred of those Jews and deported the rest to the Belzec death camp.

This "Memorial Day" is to be observed by the town's two high schools on or close to the November 8 anniversary. With the help of Zarebski, a civic-minded young physician, I will invite a historian, an eyewitness or an ordinary citizen to speak.

In my inaugural talk (in English, translated by a Pole standing beside me), I told the youngsters about Staszow's Righteous Gentiles — "true Christians," I called them. These include Maria Szczecinska, a widowed railway clerk with five children who, at risk to her own and her family's lives, hid 15 Jews in the railroad station for two years.

But I pointed out that there were townsfolk who betrayed, robbed and even murdered their Jewish neighbors.

The high-school pupils and teachers listened with rapt attention.

I wondered how often, if ever, this subject had been publicly discussed.

I expressed my pain over the desecration of the abandoned Jewish cemetery, where my four grandparents and other forebears lie buried. Especially anguishing, I said, was the unmarked mass grave in a scrub-covered hollow holding the more than 500 Jews massacred on that November 8. During the occupation, the Germans removed most

the tombstones for use as paving blocks in the muddy Market Square.

I was deeply moved by the responses of the pupils to my question what they thought could be done to restore the cemetery.

"What would you like us to do?" one boy asked.

"There ought to be a monument and a protecting fence," a girl suggested.

Another boy stood up. "We will do something about it," he pledged.

For years I had contemplated some practical way to memorialize Staszow's martyred Jews, including my uncles, aunts and cousins whom I never knew. I took on this duty as a "descendant" of Staszow, fortunately born in America because my restless parents had emigrated before the German scourge arrived.

As a child listening to the *shtetl* yarns and reminiscences of my parents and their *landsleit* gathered in our home, I had secretly longed to have been a part of their close-knit little world. The vibrant Jewry of Staszow had supported a spectrum of credos from hassidic Orthodoxy to radical political movements; social activities from orchestral concerts to soccer leagues. With joyous occasions communally shared and misfortunes lamented in common, their society had taken pride in a caring intimacy amidst poverty and recurrent adversity.

Among the questions raised in the discussion period was one by a 17-year-old girl: "What do you think of the accusation that the Poles 'have antisemitism in their blood?'"

I answered that Jews who had suffered from antisemitism in Poland were understandably bitter, and would probably always be so. But I said I believe that condemning all Poles is as wrong as antisemitism itself.

Asked whether I was visiting Jewish families in town, I was astonished at first. On second thought, however, I thought it might be a good sign that people are not so conscious of who is or isn't a Jew, and therefore the Christians of Staszow were not aware that there are no Jews living among them.

At the end of my address, whose main point was that racism, intolerance and ignorance had led to the Holocaust, I received an ovation.

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