

This Was Once My Family's Home A Visit To Stopnica

by Edward Yutkowitz

Poland had never been high on my list of places to visit. In my mind's eye, it was a bleak and barren land of peasant farmers eking out a subsistence living in a country whose past — and possibly present — was filled with anti-Semitism and the unceasing hostility of foreign invasion. My grandfather had come from the town of Stopnica, but the only thing I knew about it was that it was located near Kraków. On those occasions when I gave Stopnica — or Stopnitz, as I learned it was called in Yiddish — any thought, I envisioned a town from "Fiddler on the Roof," a town of muddy, rutted roads, of houses with thatched roofs, of poor Jews terrorized by Cossacks. Besides, everyone in my family had left Stopnica nearly 100 years ago.

Or so I thought. Through rudimentary genealogical research, I found my family name on several 19th century documents from Stopnica. But it was my discovery, in recent months, that relatives lived in the town until the Holocaust, that really inspired me to visit the land of my ancestors.

I did a great deal of research, and learned that prior to World War II, Stopnica was a town of about 3,000, of whom about 75% were Jewish. Some were killed in the early 1940s. In November 1942, the Nazis transported the rest of Stopnica's Jews — my relatives among them? — to concentration camps. Most did not survive the war.

Friends and acquaintances — Jews and gentiles alike — were apprehensive about my journey. They assumed that a small town like Stopnica would not have missed its Jewish residents, and would not welcome their descendants coming back and asking questions. At best, I anticipated a poignant and difficult trip through a backward land and a frightening history; at worst, I thought my life might be in danger.

The reality turned out to be quite different.

The Internet proved invaluable to the preparation for my trip. Simple searches turned up a number of sites dedicated to Jewish genealogy and history. Some of these, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center (<http://motlc.wiesenthal.org>), provided information on Stopnica, including its history and various spellings of its name.

From a variety of web sites, I obtained information on hotels and Jewish history and culture in Warsaw, Kraków, and Kielce. Information on the Jewish cemeteries in the town is available on the IAJGS Cemetery Project pages on the JewishGen website (www.jewishgen.org).

I knew that family members had belonged to a landsmanschaft, the Stopnitzer Young Men's Benevolent Society, in New York City, but I did not know if it still existed. An Internet search turned up the name of a Stopnitzer society in Toronto. Members of that organization put me in touch with members in New York City.

The members of the New York organization were Holocaust survivors who knew little about my grandfather's generation, but they did give me personal accounts of the war years. Moreover, they told me of two women with my family name who survived the war. Through the Internet, I was able to confirm this information with the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C.

I determined that one woman, Rose, was a second cousin. We chatted on the phone, but she was skeptical of our relationship; just as I did not know that my grandfather had left family in Stopnica, she did not know that her grandfather had five brothers — including my grandfather — who had come to America before she was born. While she spoke openly about the war years, her hometown of Stopnica held nothing but black memories for her, and she did not give me her blessings for my trip.

However, a man from the Stopnitzer organization knew of others who had returned to visit Stopnica. While he himself would not visit the town, he understood my curiosity to do so. When we met, he also said I bore a striking relationship to Rose's father, who must have been about my age, 47, when she last saw him nearly 60 years ago.

The most valuable contact I made on the Internet was Tomasz Kozlowski, a 41-year-old science teacher at a university in Kielce. Tom, who had grown up and still had family in Stopnica, graciously e-mailed me pictures of the town — the first I, or anybody in my family, had ever seen — taken both before and after World War II. After exchanging several e-mails with Tom, I revealed that I was Jewish; knowing of Stopnica's Jewish past, he had surmised as much. He also offered to show me the town if I should visit.

Tom and members of the Stopnitzer society warned me not to expect much evidence of Jewish life in Stopnica. At the end of the war, the town was a smoldering ruin; though later rebuilt, it was devoid then and forever of a Jewish community.

Still, my visit was a chance for me to walk the same streets, breathe the same air, perhaps see the same sights, as my ancestors. It was an opportunity to imagine the bleakness of their lives — and perhaps their joys.

I began my trip in Warsaw, a city both more sophisticated and more sterile than I had expected. The city was devastated during World War II. Some areas, such as the Old Town, were rebuilt and look much as they must have before the War. Other sections, including the Warsaw ghetto, are comprised largely of dilapidated high-rises built during the Communist era. Sites of Jewish interest are prominently marked; several restaurants have "Jewish" menus.

Thanks to contacts I made before I left New York City, I had the unique opportunity to meet several members of the Warsaw Jewish community, and to attend Simchat Torah services

in the one synagogue still operating in the city. They graciously invited me to join other guests, including Russian, Canadian and Israeli Jews, for a kiddush afterwards.

Following a train ride through the surprisingly picturesque Polish countryside, I met Tomasz in Kielce. A nondescript town, Kielce is known in Polish history as the summer home of the Bishops of Kraków. To Jews, the city is notorious for being the site of a pogrom in 1946. A well-maintained sign, in English, Hebrew, and Polish, marks the spot where the pogrom began.

Centrally located in the town, a large former synagogue, prominently marked as such, serves as the repository for official records for the region. One archivist, who spoke some English, was accustomed to inquiries from Jewish visitors. However, she pointed out that records from Stopnica were held in the town of Pińczów, and that I would need permission from the central archives in Warsaw to gain access to them. With Tom's help, I was able to purchase a history of the region, a 272-page book, in Polish, for the equivalent of about five dollars.

During our drive to Stopnica, Tom was curious about Jewish attitudes toward Poles. He is a student of history, and knows quite a bit about the Jewish people. However, he is defensive, perhaps even resentful, about what he perceives as a mischaracterization of Polish history and character. While acknowledging the presence of anti-Semitism in Poland, he does not think it unique, and believes that Poland has in fact been the most tolerant of countries. He talked about the traumatized state of post-war Poland, and the difficulty of two peoples — two nations — occupying the same land, and referred to a theory that the pogrom in Kielce was inspired by Communist authorities.

Tom's English is not perfect, and there didn't seem to be malice in anything he said. Given, too, that I was a guest in his car, there were times when I let remarks go without responding.

Stopnica today is a typical farming village. A large church anchors one end of the town square. In old pictures, the town square was a sparse open space filled with market stalls. In November 1942, the Nazis gathered the Jews of Stopnica in this square for transport to concentration camps.



Street life on a summer day in Stopnica

Today the square is landscaped with tree-lined paths, benches, and a kiosk selling refreshments. Shops surround the square: a furniture store, a grocery store. On a Monday afternoon in late-June, middle-aged women carried home plastic bags filled with fruits and vegetables. Young lovers strolled arm in arm. Children played on the street. Old people chatted in the shade of the storefronts. None seemed to pay any attention to the American tourist taking pictures of them.

The Kozłowski home is a block from the church. Mr. Kozłowski's father bought the house in 1935 from a Jewish family, the Wechsler, who moved to South America. Tom and his brother grew up in that house. Tom's father is a veterinarian, now retired; Tom's brother has taken over the practice.

My first few minutes in the Kozłowski home were awkward. The family was gracious, but only Tom spoke English. He suggested that I ask his father anything I wanted, but it was difficult to know where to start. As a guest in their house, I did not want to ask touchy questions.

I think they regarded me as a rather exotic creature — a representative of the Jewish people — and, in fact, for awhile I was actually answering more questions than I was asking.

Tom's mother was particularly interested in my views on Judaism and on Poland. Tom later explained that his mother admires the Jewish people. His father, on the other hand, is "neutral" on Jews, neither liking nor disliking them.

Perhaps not. But it was clear that Jewish life in Stopnica had impressed Mr. Kozłowski. He is 70 years old, and was only a child when Poland was invaded. Yet, as we talked, I was struck by his acute recollection of people and events from his childhood, his memories not only of partisan activity and Nazi terror, but details of Jewish life before the war.

I don't know if they are representative of Stopnica, but the past has had a strong impact on the Kozłowski's lives. Sixty years ago, Mrs. Kozłowski's father, a prominent civic leader from the nearby town of Szydłowice, was arrested and taken to Auschwitz. As a child, Mr. Kozłowski and his family hid in the catacombs under the Church while Russian and German forces battled in the town. Tom said that when he grew up it was not uncommon for children to be injured from ordnance remaining after the war. On occasion, too, Jewish artifacts, like candelabras, have been found, sometimes hidden under the floorboards in older houses.

When we arrived, Mr. Kozłowski had been doing repairs on his house, and Tom had not expected him to be able to spend much time with me. Apparently, though, his father saw my visit as a rather special event, and took me — and his sons — on a tour of the town.



A typical street in Stopnica

As we strolled, Mr. Kozlowski pointed out houses in which he remembered Jewish families lived. At one site, he remembered some Jews surreptitiously obtaining pork from the non-kosher butcher who once worked there. He was pleased that I recognized the word "yatka," the Polish word for butcher.

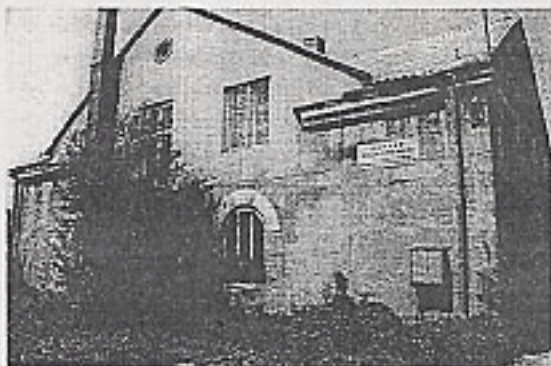
I have heard that anti-Semitism flourished in Stopnica. However, I have also heard that Jews and gentiles generally got along on a day-to-day basis. Tom's father's recollections suggest that there is some truth to the latter. At the site of one building, for example, stood the Jewish bakery from which his mother bought bread.



Some of the buildings in Stopnica are still pocked with bullet holes from fighting between German and Soviet troops in WWII.

While bullet holes are still evident on some old buildings, other buildings that had been destroyed have been rebuilt. On the town square, where the synagogue once stood is now a nondescript commercial building. The Mikvah building still stands, but has in recent years been used as a slaughterhouse.

A street one block from the town square, Mr. Kozlowski pointed out, was once named after Berek Joselewicz, an officer in the Polish army. When there was some confusion about the spelling, Tom's brother made a point of looking it up and writing it on a piece of paper for me. This street also, Tom's father pointed out, fronted a farm that belonged to a Jewish family.



According to Mr. Kozlowski, this building was a mikvah before the War. Since that time, it has served as a slaughterhouse.

From the Internet, I had learned that there were two Jewish cemeteries in Stopnica. Tom knew of one. Mr. Kozlowski knew of both.

One is located a short distance from the center of town, adjacent to towers suspending electric lines terminating in what looks like a power substation. The area is not fenced off. There are no headstones, but broken rocks cover apparent graves. Mr. Kozlowski, his two sons, and I walked quietly and respectfully through the high grass stirring gently in the warm summer breeze. It was very sad and very peaceful, and I couldn't help but wonder if we were walking among the graves of my ancestors.

As a child, Mr. Kozlowski saw German soldiers execute Jewish and Catholic men — partisans, he said — in this cemetery. The Catholic widows, he said, had to pay for the privilege of taking their loved ones to their own cemetery.

Perhaps a mile away, another cemetery is located in a flat grassy area adjacent to a brick municipal garage. It is fenced off, but the headstones are gone — used for paving stones, I was later told by a member of the Stopnitzer society. Mr. Kozlowski described the headstones as "matzevah," a Hebrew word I had never heard before. Across the street from the cemetery is a grist mill, which created a stir in the town when it was built before the war by a local Jew.

I am glad I visited Stopnica, if only for being better able now to imagine the lives of my ancestors. My great grandfather Yehiel was a carpenter, as was my grandfather, Abraham. Perhaps they had a hand in building some of the older houses in the town. My great-grandfather, I have been told, played bass fiddle in a church in Stopnica, perhaps the very church that today dominates the town. Maybe his music brought joy to the great-grandparents of the very people who watched me take pictures of their village.

I think my visit meant something to the Kozlowski's as well. Tom said his father had never talked so movingly or in such detail about the war, and especially not about the Jews who were so much a part of Stopnica's life in his early years. Before I left, the Kozlowski's gave me a small book, published last year, containing the history of the town.

Frankly, I was also filled with gratitude that my grandfather left Poland. Its history aside, Stopnica is a very small town. Even after my visit, I cannot imagine being Jewish in such a place. The trip allowed me to make connections with a past that's swathed in shadows, a past filled with pain. Yet I feel some sense of triumph, of pride, that the descendants of peasants, of carpenters and tailors, came to America and not only survived, but prospered.

On the day I left Europe, an agreement was reached on restitution to Jewish Holocaust survivors. The *International Herald Tribune* reported that there are 10,000 Jews in Poland. Maybe. Given the numbers I heard in Warsaw and Kraków, I am skeptical. Is there still anti-Semitism? Undoubtedly. But I didn't see strong evidence of it. What I saw was a country defensive about its past, and yet very much looking forward to a bright and free future.

There are no plaques in Stopnica for the Jews. But neither is there a memorial to the "Polish" victims of Nazi terror, nor, for that matter, one for victims of the Communist authorities after the war. I suppose that for most people in Stopnica, and for the hundreds of Stopnicas throughout Poland, time has simply moved on.

For survivors of the Holocaust, I have found, my visit to Stopnica has stirred dark memories — and yet curiosity about the town's present state and occupants. When I returned, a member of the Stopnitzer society called, curious about my experience. He confirmed many of Mr. Kozlowski's memories. I also received a call from my new-found cousin Rose, who now accepts my visit and looks forward to meeting me, curious, I think, about my resemblance to her father.

My journal would not be complete without mentioning my stay in Kraków, a city I found nothing less than delightful. Virtually unscathed by the war, charming and sophisticated, it is not yet overrun by tourists, and possesses many sites of interest to Jewish travelers.

While I have returned to America, I'm not sure my journey is over. I never did the genealogical research that initially inspired my trip, and expect that I will someday go back to complete it. Before then, I will also have the histories of Kielce and Stopnica translated. I expect, too, to keep in touch with Tom Kozlowski; I have many questions left to ask his father. I also hope to speak in greater depth to members of the Stopnitzer society, both to flesh out my understanding of Jewish life in Poland, and to help ensure that the story of Stopnica's Jews is not forgotten.



Stopnica is still a farming community, much as it was when Jews made up the majority of the town.

Travel Tips For Visitors To Poland

For those planning a trip to Poland, some advice: plan your genealogical research well in advance, and visit the important government offices, particularly in Warsaw, immediately upon arrival. Unfortunately, I didn't. One government office was closed on the afternoon I visited. Because I didn't get authorization in Warsaw, I was unable to do research in the town of Pińczów, where the records for Stopnica were held.¹

Keep in mind that the Jewish communities of Warsaw and Kraków are observant, and Jewish cultural organizations will be closed on holidays and early on Friday afternoons.

The Polish tourist office in New York was very helpful, and sent me well-produced material on travel in Poland, including a brochure of sites of particular Jewish interest.

It is prudent to carry travelers' checks, some American money, as well as several ATM cards. Not all ATM machines in Poland take American Express cards. Remarkably, the money exchange at the Warsaw train station did not accept American Express travelers' checks.

I would not advise wandering alone, asking questions and taking pictures, in rural villages. For one thing, most people in small towns are not conversant in English. Small towns everywhere resent intrusions, but the Poles may be particularly sensitive to people coming to claim ancestral property or raise ugly issues of the past. Ideally, establish contact with someone who can provide you with personal guidance. Hotels in Kraków may be able to provide English-speaking guides.

It is not always easy to find lodging in Kielce or Kraków. Kielce has only three hotels. The Lysogory, conveniently located just across from the train station, is plain, but clean, and has a restaurant with a satisfactory menu. However, my room did not have air-conditioning, and I was kept awake all night by the sound of traffic. The Exbud is a modern hotel located outside of town. Designed for business travelers, it has a bar, and a restaurant with an extensive menu, set in a sky-lit atrium. The hotel's phone system did not allow access to AmericaOnline, and presumably other Internet services, but I was told that will soon change. The staff at both hotels spoke English.

Kraków is becoming an increasingly popular destination for tourists and business groups. Large hotels are often fully booked, particularly on weekends. However, a number of small hotels in the old Jewish quarter cater to visitors searching for their roots. At the Esther Hotel, for example, a cab driver offered to take me to Stopnica. He had a friend from the town, had taken other Americans there, and knew where the cemeteries were located. He wanted about \$100 for the day, but this was negotiable. His English was passable for sightseeing purposes, but I'm not sure whether he could have helped me to do any serious translation of documents.

One American Jew took his Polish roots so seriously he decided to open a hotel just off Szeroka, the main street in the Jewish quarter. In fact, Alan Haberberg, whose father left Kraków on a "kinder transport," a program to save Jewish children of Poland, was determined not merely to find his roots, but to establish a permanent presence in Kraków. He bought an old building and spent four years renovating it. Open for several months, the Hotel Eden is immaculate, and boasts a bright, attractive, and multilingual staff that is eager to please. Mezuzahs adorn every door, and every effort is made to provide Kosher food in the restaurant.

— Edward Yutkowitz

¹ This policy changed after July 3, 2000. "There is no necessity to obtain the permission of the General Director of State Archives for foreigners wishing to use certain records to genealogical and property matters kept in the state archives. In such cases the permission is given by the director of the certain state archives". See the PSA's website at <http://ciu.w.warman.net.pl/alf/archiwa/archiwa/korzy_stanie.eng.html>. [Ed.]